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OR,

The Baffled Black Hawk's Fate.

A Companion Story to "Chincapin Dan,
the Boy Trailer."

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "YELLOWSTONE JACK," "HURRI-
CANE BILL," "DAINTY LANCE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN AVENGING "KID."

"RUN—but you're my meat! Pap says so!"
Realizing that the tide of battle had turned
squarely against him and his band of evil-
workers, Wilder Hawkings turned to seek
safety in flight, having no time to pick and
choose, but scrambling into the saddle of the
first horse he came to.

CHINCAPIN DAN TOPPLED OVER THE ESCARPMENT. BUT, IN SO FALLING, HE TOOK
HIS PRISONER, BLACK BRUNO, WITH HIM.

Of its own accord the animal wheeled at a sharp angle to dash away, and this helped to hasten the end.

Wilder Hawkings heard that vengeful scream, and caught sight of Chincapin Dan, just as the lad paused long enough to throw up his rifle and fire; then he reeled in the saddle, his breath driven from his lungs by a heavy shock.

Only the heavy buckle of his arms' belt saved him from a mortal wound, but the fastening was broken, and the belt itself fell away. A blind clutch fastened his fingers upon the butt of a revolver, but the weapon slipped from its holster, letting its mate, a knife, and fixed ammunition, fall to the ground.

An exclamation of rage parted his lips, but he dared not attempt to retrieve his loss. Chincapin Dan was steadying himself for a surer shot, and the cheering Texans under Colonel Jo Townsend were rapidly nearing the crater where the fight had begun.*

Only hasty flight could save him now!

He bent low in the saddle and desperately spurred his horse on, his flesh quivering as it anticipated another shot. If the friendly cover was nearer! If his reckless Harriers had not been so lucklessly scattered!

A single breath, and Hawkings cast a glance over his shoulder, to see Chincapin Dan rushing toward the nearest horse, that dull click having told him his rifle was empty and useless until the magazine could be replenished.

The same glance showed him a number of his Harriers fleeing from the enemy in a panic, and then he viciously scored the flanks of his horse.

"You're my meat, Wild Hawk!" cried Chincapin Dan, in hot pursuit. "It's for pap—he's helpin' me git even!"

A patch of timber shut off all view of the crater and those nearest it. Now the fugitive Hawk and the youthful avenger were the only human occupants of that desolate stretch.

The outlaw looked back. He saw that Chincapin Dan was coolly slipping cartridges into the magazine of his rifle. He saw that the lad was easily holding his own in that race. Though the animals seemed well matched, the youth rode lightest, and two-score pounds make a killing handicap.

"Only him! Not another soul in sight! They'll come, but if I can get rid of him first!"

Hawkings drew a long breath. The bandage had slipped down from the ghastly cut in his breast, and his wounds were bleeding anew.

He turned half-way around in his saddle, lifting the sole weapon that remained to him, hoping by a shot to forever rid himself of that young bloodhound.

But, swift as thought, Chincapin Dan lifted his rifle, discharging it seemingly without aim, even as Hawkings pulled trigger.

Struck by the heavy bullet, the pistol was torn from his hand, bits of the battered lead stinging his face like wasps, while two of his fingers were terrible shattered by the missile itself.

"The Chincapin Dan, critter!" cried the boy trailer, full of almost savage vengeance as he heard that howl of despairing pain and rage. "I'm the kid of the man you butchered back by the Rocky! An' you're my meat, of I be a boy!"

Half-crazed with pain and impotent anger, Wild Hawk spurred his horse onward. Crippled, weaponless, what could he do?

His instincts urged him to turn and try to close with his enemy, for once at arm's length he felt that he could rend that stripling, limb from limb, crippled though one hand was; but, one glance into that hard-set face warned him differently. Chincapin Dan could fairly riddle him with bullets before he could wheel and close.

For the first time in his remembrance Wilder Hawkings knew what actual terror meant. And, as he urged his horse on toward the low line of timber which he knew marked the course of the river, something like ice seemed forming around his evil heart.

Why did the boy not shoot? Why did he not try to cripple the horse, if he wished to save the rider for torture? Was this part of his vengeance? Was he to play mouse to that young demon's cat?

With each swift-coming question that strange sense of terror grew stronger, and the once strong man lost sight of all else in his desperate longing to escape.

If he could only gain yonder belt of timber! Beyond it lay the river, and with that once placed between himself and his young enemy, he surely might hope for ultimate escape!

"Bruno—curse ye, whelp!" with a gasping groan, born of the memory thus evoked. "Why arn't ye here to help me?"

He had been expecting his son, Bruno Hawkings, and from that very direction. Only for his unaccountable delay, naught of all this misfortune could have overcome him. All would have gone well, and by this time, instead of being a helpless fugitive, he would have been master, his life-work completed, his burning lust for revenge satiated, his future fully provided for.

Yet, even with that curse on his lips, Hawkings eagerly swept the timber-line before him, longing rather than hoping to see his son ready to not only save him, but to kill that blood-avenger who so pitilessly played with him.

He dared not look back, but he knew that Chincapin Dan was gaining on him, surely if slowly. He knew that his life hung on the mercy of the lad whose father he had so brutally butchered only a few days before. And in that knowledge lay the most exquisite torture, for with each moment he anticipated death.

Nearer and nearer to the line of timber, yet not a shot came from his pursuer. Five—three—one minute more!

What was the young bloodhound doing? Was he even now lifting his rifle to send a death, or crippling shot? Was he only waiting until escape seemed actually within the grasp of the fugitive?

"The pitiless devil!" mentally groaned the cowering wretch, his flesh quivering as though with a violent ague. "If I had a gun—even a knife! If Bruno—why don't he show up?"

With hand and heel he madly urged his horse on, heading straight for the cover, now only a few rods away. He knew that hiding would be impossible, with his pursuer so close upon his track, and he gave that no further thought. Beyond the timber rolled the river; once fairly there, he surely might escape!

He caught his breath sharply as he heard a short, broken cry from the rear, but he had no time to look back, though he knew fairly well what must have happened: the stumble and fall of Chincapin Dan's horse just as the lad was aiming to cripple the mount of his enemy.

He bowed his head low to guard against the branches, then sent his horse plunging blindly down a steep bank, into the timber. A furious scramble through the brambles and scrubby bushes; another reckless leap down a crumbling bank and over a narrow line of sandbar.

The river was just ahead of him, and, as he forced his frightened horse to enter, he cast a glance backward, to gasp with intense relief as he failed to catch sight of his relentless chaser.

After a plunge or two his horse lost its footing and sunk below the surface, with a wild snort of terror; but Hawkings slipped from the saddle and relieved the animal of his weight, supporting himself by a grip on the tangled mane with one hand, using the other on the bit to keep the animal's head turned for the further shore.

Once started, the horse swam nobly, and was nearing the middle of the stream before Chincapin Dan leaped through the bushes upon the sandbar, rifle in hand.

The Wild Hawk tried to cover himself more perfectly by the head and neck of his horse, but, swift as thought, that rifle spoke. The man gave a wild cry—the horse flung up its head, rearing half out of water and pawing madly with its fore-feet; then both man and beast sunk beneath the surface, tinging the clear water with blood!

That water cut Hawkings's cry short, not the finger of death. He was crippled, not slain. The bullet had shattered his wrist, then buried itself in the brain of the horse.

Caught in the loose bridle-reins, Hawkings was carried beneath the surface by the dying struggles of the horse, and was half-stunned by a blow on the head from one iron-shod hoof.

The current, quickening as it drew nearer to the rapids—almost falls—only a short distance below, carried man and beast downward. Its gasping lungs filled with water, the horse kept below the surface until it struck near the upper end of a broad, flat rock which rose a foot or more above the level of the river. Then its carcass came into view of the pale-faced avenger, turning over and swinging around until it cleared the moss-fringed rock, then slowly sinking from sight once more, to reappear when the rapids were reached.

But never a sight of the man whom he had chased to—was it Death?

It should be, if it wasn't already!

Chincapin Dan plunged into the river, swimming rapidly out to the flat rock, gazing about in hopes of detecting the man's body, lodged at the upper end where the carcass of the horse first struck. In vain.

He could see nothing human-like in the clear, green water that flowed so smoothly past his feet.

He knelt down and brushed a hand along the edge of the rock, although he felt that he was acting wildly in so doing. Only the soft, slimy streamers of moss guarded the cold stone.

He rose to gaze toward the rapids, through which, rolling, pitching, tumbling from rock to rock, the carcass of the dead horse had passed.

Even if a breath of life had lingered in the body of his enemy, it would surely have been driven out by contact with those foam-crested boulders!

"Fer you, pap, I done it! Life fer life! Ef the critter'd hed ten thousan', all in a heap, I'd 'a' tuck 'em all as pay fer yours!"

A friendly shout came from the shore, and, after a last lingering look around him, the young avenger left the rock and swam back to land, little dreaming of the truth; that all this time only a few inches of moss-fringed rock had separated him from his enemy!

Yet, such was indeed the case, and only a few minutes later Wilder Hawkings cautiously showed his face by the edge of the rock, to painfully drag himself from the water when satisfied that his enemy was indeed gone.

Then he sunk down in a deathlike stupor on the cold rock.

CHAPTER II.

BRUNO ON HAND.

"WHAT is it? Cold meat, or quick?"

Bruno Hawkings asked himself these questions the next morning as he came down to the river for a drink, after his wild-wood meal.

With the natural instincts of a man whose life contains many dangerous secrets, he paused just within the fringe of cover, to send a keen, comprehensive glance around and over the river, his eyes pausing at that flat rock, on which lay—surely it was a human shape?

"Hardly a floater, for the river isn't high enough to wash a body up on top of that rock. Yet—wonder if the old gentleman has been getting in any of his funny work?"

A low, disagreeable laugh bore those words company, and Bruno Hawkings shaded his eyes with one hand as he tried once more to make out the full nature of that suspicious looking object.

"A man, easy enough; but alive or dead? Wonder if he has any ear for music?"

Again that ugly laugh, though the tones were soft and musical enough in themselves; and drawing a navy-size revolver from the holster resting against his hip, he leveled it toward the rock.

His position on the bank, a number of yards above the level of the river, gave him altitude enough for his purpose, and an instant after the explosion, there came a shrill, vicious sound as, glancing from the gritty surface of the rock, the battered bullet soared upward and onward.

"Wake up Johnny!" chuckled Bruno, as he saw that head spasmodically rise a few inches, only to drop heavily down again. "Not dead, or you've got a rare ear for music, old fellow! And yet—"

He stopped short, catching his breath sharply, leaning forward to gaze keenly, eagerly toward the man on the rock.

"Is it—it can't be!" he muttered, his dark face turning a bit paler with the bare thought.

Slight as had been the change at that vicious sound, it was sufficient to bring nearly half of that face into view, though left in shadow by the rising sun. And with his suspicions taking a startling change, Bruno Hawkings hastened back to his night-camp, taking a pair of field-glasses from the pockets behind his saddle, then running to the river-bank and gazing at that ghastly face once more.

Not for long. Brought closer by the lenses, recognition was almost instant, and a startling oath burst from those red lips.

"The old gent, by glory! What brought him—"

He left the question incomplete, sweeping his gaze up, down, across the river, taking in each and every visible object as by magic.

There were no signs of enemies to be detected: no smoke of near camp-fires; naught to show that other than they two inhabited that vast wilderness. And relieved on this score, Bruno Hawkings bethought himself how he could the most easily rescue his father from that rock in the middle of the river.

"He must be in a mighty bad way!" remembering that feeble, sluggish movement of a few minutes before. "He can't help himself, that's plain! Then—can he stick in a saddle?"

He half-turned toward his horse, hitched near

* See HALF-DIME 625.

his camp-fire, but paused with a dark scowl, to gaze once more toward that motionless figure lying on the rock.

He inflated his lungs, to shout aloud the name of his father, but let the breath expire without so using it. He again swept the further shore with his glass, suspicious of lurking enemies.

"Better not—who knows?"

Slipping the glasses into the case and hanging it to a bush by the strap attached, Bruno passed up the shore, looking here and there, giving a nod of grim satisfaction as he caught sight of a dry cedar tree, broken off by some long-ago storm.

With hand, foot and knife, he quickly robbed the trunk of its dead branches, leaving each spur a foot or more in length, then dragging the float down to the water. He stripped off his outer garments, taking one revolver with him, knowing that its metallic cartridges could defy the water. Buttoning the holster flap securely, and making sure his knife fitted snugly in its scabbard, he entered the river, pushing the cedar float before him, striking out strongly toward the middle of the stream as soon as he lost his footing.

The task was an easy one, for he had entered the river many yards above the flat rock. And keeping the log at right angles with the current, he quickly lodged it at the upper end of the rock, where the broken branches securely held it from slipping loose.

"Father—how goes it?" called out Bruno, resting his broad chest on the rock and sweeping another suspicious glance along each shore before reaching out a hand to touch his parent. "What's the matter with you, anyhow?"

A husky groan answered him. Wild Hawk feebly lifted his head, a dazed look in his blood-shot eyes, his terribly crippled hand lifting until it dangled helplessly before his face, the movement starting the blood to slowly oozing from the mangled flesh.

"Who did it?" hoarsely demanded Bruno, his flesh creeping at the sight. "Tell me, so I can get even!"

Those cracked, parched lips opened, but only an inarticulate sound escaped them. His head sunk down, and Wilder Hawkings could only gaze imploringly at his son.

Bruno, cursing himself for not having brought his flask along, crept out upon the rock, lifting water in his hands to bathe the wounded man's face and moisten his lips. A few moments of this, then Wilder Hawkings eagerly lapped up water from those joined palms, seeming to gain strength with each passing moment now. And before long he huskily mumbled:

"Get—shore! Must live—revenge!"

"We'll do one and have the other, father," grimly laughed his son, after another precautionary glance along the further shore. "I've brought a log for you to lie on, and I can push you to dry land easy enough before the current carries us down to the rapids. Never fear, daddy, and never say die!"

"Not now—with you, Bruno!"

Swinging the log alongside, one of the stumps holding it securely in place, Bruno aided his father to get astride the float, fixing him so that he could lie with his breast between two forks, then swung the cedar away from the rock, swimming behind and pushing it before him to shore, which was reached without trouble or accident.

From time to time Wilder Hawkings lapped the cool water, and this refreshed him so much that, when land was reached, he rose to his feet unaided. He refused Bruno's offer to carry him up to the camp-fire, and by leaning heavily on that athletic form, he managed to reach the spot which, by force of contrast, seemed almost like heaven to the crippled wretch.

Bruno quickly found his liquor flask, and though he refused to let the wounded man drink as much as he craved, it was only that he might eat something first.

Until food was prepared and eaten with a relish, he would neither ask questions nor listen to explanations. Even when Wild Hawk savagely cursed him for dallying by the way so long, he kept silence.

"If you had been on time—if you'd kept to my orders, you infernal whelp!" groaned the elder man, bitterly. "All would have been well! All would have come our way, instead of going flat against us! We would have been rich men this day, instead of—a cripple for life! Gods! a cripple for life!"

Even then Bruno kept his peace, though his strong teeth grated audibly as he glanced at that mutilated hand and wrist.

One finger was entirely gone, close to the palm. Another dangled by the skin and a bit

of discolored flesh. The lead had inflicted still further harm, but only to the flesh.

But the worst injury was to the wrist, where Chincapin Dan's second shot had struck, before passing into the brain of the poor horse.

The bullet had shattered the wrist-bones in a terrible manner, and even the best of surgical skill, promptly applied, could not have saved the member to its owner.

As soon as his father had eaten quite freely of the hot meat and warmed-over bread, drinking a liberal supply of hot coffee, Bruno broke the silence he had stubbornly maintained, saying:

"Let me care for your hand, father. You can stand it better now. I know enough of surgery to patch it up so it'll keep until we get to a safer place of treatment."

"Curse the hand!" growled Wild Hawk, showing his teeth and pushing his son back with his sound hand. "I've stood it since yesterday, and it can wait its turn a bit longer. Now—what kept you so long?"

"No fault of mine, be sure."

"Where's— I told you to bring that cursed—"

"I started with the parson, father, on time, too; but his beast stumbled with the old fool, and I had to finally leave him behind. He broke a leg—bad luck to his pipe-stem bones!"

"May they never join! May he rot from top to toe! Only for that we'd have—"

"What, father?" harshly interposed Bruno, squatting down in front of the savagely raging ruffian, catching his bloodshot eye and holding him steady by a greater will. "I've gone this far blind. If you had trusted me from the send-off, maybe matters would have panned out better; surely they could not have turned out worse!"

That steady gaze quickly produced the desired effect. Weakened by his wounds and loss of blood, Wilder Hawkings was in poor condition for resisting so powerful a will, and gradually he calmed down before it.

"I told you there was a vast fortune to be won just by marrying a pretty girl, didn't I?" he moodily mumbled.

"Only that, and nothing more," with a short nod, his mustached lips curling as he spoke.

There had never been a very strong resemblance between the twain, though they were father and son, with much the same wild, reckless, lawless nature; but the likeness was still fainter now that the elder man was so terribly worn by his recent trials and sufferings.

Wilder Hawkings was in the prime of life, powerful of frame, his face handsome after a blunt, rugged fashion, marred only by the peculiar light which habitually glowed in his black eyes: the light that marks the panther, the wolf—savage, treacherous in the extreme.

Bruno Hawkings possessed much the same sort of eyes, but he could better mask the false light that lurked in their depths. His figure was taller, more perfectly proportioned, while none the less powerful when put to a test. His skin was darker—so dark, in fact, that it had won for him, among his evil associates, the name of "Black Hawk Bruno"—and his hair was worn long, curling at the ends, touching his shoulders in true cowboy fashion.

Though so dark, his skin seemed smooth and soft as that of a girl, while his full lips were red as ever maiden bore, giving his face an effeminate look which not even the neatly-trimmed, curling mustaches could entirely relieve.

Wild Hawk lowered his eyes before that steady gaze, his tones sounding sulky as he mumbled:

"Wasn't that enough?"

"As a starter, perhaps, but not even a beginning the way matters stand at present. But, better let me look after that hand, father. It may mean all the difference between an arm below or above the elbow!"

A groan broke from those cracked lips, and the once strong man shivered like a leaf as he looked at his mutilated hand and wrist.

"My good right hand, too!" he groaned, bitterly. "My pistol hand! I could have lost the other more lightly!"

"I've two good sound ones to take its place, father," quietly said Black Hawk Bruno, as the crippled man bowed his head. "Tell me who did this. I'll kill him before I eat or drink again!"

"That boy—Todd Dickerman's boy—curses cover him a mile deep!" flashed the wounded wretch.

"Did he cut you here, too, father?" asked Bruno, gently touching a fresh stain of blood not far below the other's heart.

"No—I don't know for sure. Go take a look—see if any one is near—then I'll tell you the whole story, Bruno," said Wild Hawk, suddenly regaining his composure in a good measure.

CHAPTER III.

THE TWO HAWKS.

BLACK BRUNO took a brief scout around the camp, though it was more to set his father's fears at ease than through any idea that enemies were harboring nigh.

When he returned to report all was well, he saw that Wild Hawk had wrapped a bit of cloth around his crippled hand, and was forming a temporary sling for it by opening the front of his embroidered flannel shirt.

That same apprehensive glance assured him that the wound below Hawkins's heart had ceased to bleed, and feeling now that the loss of a few more minutes could hardly make matters much worse, he made no renewal of his offer to dress the injuries.

"So, youngster, you want your eyes opened, do you?" bluntly asked Wild Hawk, looking and speaking much more like his usual self.

"If I'm to play your hand out, why not give me an idea of how the cards have dropped, so far as played?"

"I was a fool for not starting that way!" frowned Wild Hawk, blackly. "And yet—who the foul fiend could have foreseen such an infernally crooked streak of luck? Who could—bah!" with a short, forced laugh: "I'm an invalid, and mustn't let my passions rise. Eh, Bruno?"

"Give me the hint, and I'll do the cursing for you, daddy."

"Will you do the work, now my hand—now I've failed?"

"I'll do it or make a worse failure, father."

"I swear you'll carry out my plan to the bitter end?"

"I swear I'll do my level best to carry your plans to complete success, sir!"

"Good enough! Shake on—crippled!"

Wild Hawk impulsively moved his right hand as he uttered that ejaculation of savage satisfaction, but as a sharp twinge of pain shot from wrist to shoulder, he broke off with a groan of fierce grief.

Nothing else could have proved how terribly he felt his mishap. Just then, had the choice been given him, he would have elected death a whole man, rather than life a cripple.

"Let everything rest, father, until I've brought back a head for that hand. Tell me who fired the shot, and where I'm likely to find him. That's plenty to start with!"

But Wild Hawk once more conquered himself. He hid the mutilated member in his bosom, and though more than a minute passed in silence, his dark eyes staring vacantly at the ground, it was only the better to decide just where he should begin his recital of the past, present and to come.

"How much do you know about the business, Bruno?" he asked, at length, lifting his eyes to meet the gaze of his son.

"That you set out in pursuit of Todd Dickerman and his children. That they were making for Texas, where they could work you considerable harm unless you could intercept them. That I was to bring the parson with me, and meet you across the river yonder."

"Where I waited your coming long enough to—if you had only made the trip on time, Bruno!"

"I did my level best, sir. I had to find Johnston, and then—"

"I know; you explained it before. Now—to go back to the beginning, Bruno!"

He sat for some moments in silence, resting his head on his sound left hand, then spoke slowly, monotonously, like one reading from a distant page of intricate characters:

"Never mind why or how, Bruno, but the bitterest enemies I ever had, were twins, named Townsend; Joseph and Edward. They fought through the war in the Federal Army; I fought for the South, as you know. And after the surrender, they were Colonel Jo and Major Ed."

"I hated 'em both, but I hated Major Ed heap sight the worst. And as soon as I could get on his track, after the Mexico trip, I set about getting even with him."

"I knew something of the sort was in the wind, but you bluffed me so sharply when I asked, that I let my offer to help lie by."

"Your time hadn't come, Bruno. But let me tell my story after my own fashion. We'll have time enough for clearing up any and all obscure points before I can take the field again—worse luck!"

"As I started to say, when I found my man, after the war, he had settled down in Texas, running a vast stock farm, already rich enough for a score of common men. And—he had two children, Bruno!"

"You knew his wife, sir?" slowly ventured

the younger man, a gleam of comprehension coming into his black eyes as he noted that frown.

"I knew his wife, if you will have it!" growled Wild Hawk, viciously. "It was the same old story over again! What I lost, he won! While I came out of battle a beggar, he came out richer than ever. And not content with fattening on the spoils taken from my plantation, he robbed me of—bah!" with a short, ugly laugh as he tossed back his head. "What has a cripple to do with sentiment? Business, Bruno!"

"Until I learned about those kids, lad, I was thinking only of lapping blood. After—well, I knew from the still sore spot in my own carcass, that some things are even more bitter than sudden death!"

"Major Ed lost his kids. He spent time and poured out money like water in time of a freshet, but that's all the good it did him or his lady wife. My hand dealt the blow, and my brain covered up all tracks.

"At first I meant simply to play the old-time brigand trick: hold the kids to a ransom that should strip Major Ed of half his fortune, vast as that had grown to be. But then—and I had ample time for studying over the matter while lying low and laughing in my sleeve at that close if useless search—I hit on a still better scheme.

"One of the kids was a girl, and I had a living son; yourself, Bruno. So—why not wait a little longer, and take the whole instead of one-half?"

"Then the girl you spoke of my marrying was the daughter of your Major Ed?"

"Of course."

"Todd Dickerman raised her?"

"I paid him for it—yes."

"And the other kid; was that one a boy?"

"It was a boy. What are you driving at, Bruno?"

"Was he called Dan—Chincapin Dan?"

Wilder Hawkings stared into that keen face for a space, his own eyes opening widely. But then he burst into a laugh as he said:

"You're 'way off, Bruno! Do you take me for a fool? Would I put all my eggs in one basket? And such mighty valuable ones, too?"

"Give it up, dad!" sighed the other, sinking back into an easier position. "You're telling the story. I'm just listening."

"I separated the children the hour I reached a place of safety, and from that day to this neither has seen the other. Never will, for that matter, since the boy—the youngest kid, by the way—died when he was hardly old enough to talk plain."

"All right. Then in punishing this Chincapin Dan, I'll not be cutting off a possible brother-in-law," softly laughed Black Bruno.

"No. He's Dickerman's own son."

"And Dickerman's own self, dad?"

"Wolf-bait—curse him!"

"Hope the grub agreed with them! But you were saying?"

Wild Hawk paused a time, seemingly running over what he had already narrated, then picked up the broken thread.

"It would take too long to tell you just how often I took a sip of revenge during all these years, Bruno. Enough for now that at odd spells I let Major Ed know the heaviest blow had not yet fallen. I sent him word at intervals that both his children were living, being trained in life by—what would he give to know just whom?"

"I'm not sure but this uncertainty helped rob Major Ed of his lady wife. I kept shady, of course, but all the same I knew that she was gradually pining away, growing weaker and more angel-like as the years crept by without restoring her children to her arms.

"I was only sorry that no other children came to them. If robbing them of two gave such exquisite delight, three, or four would be just that much better. But none other came, and Major Ed lost his wife as well as his children."

"And you: didn't you strike him for any money, dad?"

"A round score of times, and got it, too," grimly chuckled the older ruffian. "Each time Major Ed, backed by Colonel Jo, tried to make a trap work, but as often he had his pains for his reward. The right time hadn't come for showing the hand that struck at his heart.

"Just as I believed the right time had come, I got warning that Todd Dickerman meant to play me false!"

"Wasn't it rather risky on your part, giving him light enough to see just how he *could* betray you, daddy?" dryly asked Bruno.

"How he got that light, I'll never tell you!" with an ugly scowl on his swarthy face. "I kept him in the dark as to my plans, and never for a moment suspected that he knew aught of the truth. Yet—well, smell it out he certainly did! And tried to make the most of his knowledge, too, curse the old rascal!"

"Ditto on my side, dad!" nodded his hopeful son. "May he rest easy on the stomachs which gave him burial!"

"I didn't get the warning early enough to catch the knave nearer home, nor would I have caught him at all, only for his backwoods cunning, which led him to distrust the cars and elect to make the trip by horse-power instead.

"I knew what he meant when I found his trail pointing toward Texas, through No Man's Land, and only stopped long enough to prepare a message for you. Then I gathered my Harriers and set out in chase."

"Of course you overtook the rascal?"

"On the Rocky—yes. Just in time to save him from Jimmy Gee and a gang of his horse-lifters, too."

"You did save him, then?" softly laughed Bruno.

"Saved him in the only way he deserved, of course. I sent a bullet through him, with my own hand. And I thought sure I had served his boy, Chincapin Dan, the same way. I know he dropped like a log, and I saw where the lead struck; a center-shot it looked to be, too!"

"Glanced, maybe?"

Wild Hawk nodded gloomily. In his heart he was cursing himself for having taken so much for granted. How differently everything might have turned out, had he only given that boy another and surer shot!

"I gave Jimmy Gee and his buzzards the team and such plunder as they thought worth carrying away, for I thought they had done me an important service; which brings in some other characters, Bruno.

"Colonel Jo Townsend also had children, one older than the girl, one about the same age, and one a year or two younger than her; all stout, healthy boys. They, with a cousin, son of a sister to the twins, and an old rascal called Billy Breeze, had come into No Man's Land for a hunt, and Jimmy Gee set them afire, in part payment for a flogging which Major Ed and Colonel Jo had given him for lifting a few horses from the Twin Ranch.

"When Jimmy told me this, I thought it would pay well with my plans, and so I treated him a little better than I otherwise would; but as matters turned out, that job was black luck in my pudding!"

"They helped down you, then, dad?"

Wild Hawk nodded assent, his face blacker than ever. From start to finish it was a bitter dose he was forced to swallow, and the mere repeating it stung him to the quick.

"Just how they met up with Chincapin Dan, and just why they joined hands with him, I'll never tell you until I've got more light; but join him they certainly did, and downed not only me but my Hawks as well!"

"So many more to put on our black book, dad," nodded Bruno. "You can give me their names, of course?"

"Time enough; I'm thinking now of Jimmy Gee—curse the hand that bit me so deep!" panted Wild Hawk, turning pale, pressing his sound hand tightly over the wound in his left side. "Swear to me that you'll hunt him out and take his scalp, Bruno Hawkings! Swear it—scalp him alive—skin him by inches, I tell you!"

"If you say so—I swear it, father!"

Alarmed afresh by that ghastly pallor, Bruno Hawkings sprang to his feet, eager to assist his parent by caring for the neglected wounds, but Wild Hawk savagely waved him off.

"Not now—time enough, after I've told you all!"

CHAPTER IV.

A HAND FOR A LIFE.

BRUNO was not so easily repulsed this time, for he knew that the crippled man needed prompt attention, but all his urgings were of no avail. Wilder Hawkings had marked out a line for himself, and nothing short of actual death could sway him to one side or the other.

"I'm all right. Give me the flask. It bit, but the devil was too badly frightened to send his fangs clean home. So!" drawing a long breath as he lowered the nearly emptied flask, that unnatural pallor slowly fading from his swarthy face. "I'm myself again!"

Though reluctantly, Bruno was forced to yield to that iron will.

"Cut it as short as you can, father. I've got the main facts already, haven't I?"

"Some of them, but not enough. Maybe I'll not be able to tell you what must be done, after you've begun your butchering, lad," with a grim smile as he gently shifted his crippled hand. "When you know all, then we'll talk about my hurts."

He went on to speak more fully of the tragedy beside the Rocky Creek, that black night. He told how the camp was surrounded. How the old man was killed, and how Chincapin Dan, his son, was left for dead.

"I caught the girl before she could do more than jump to the door of her tent. She was dressed, and looked as though she had dropped asleep before she intended it. And as she struggled with me, she dropped a sealed packet of papers, which Jimmy Gee picked up and gave me."

"That was the first I learned of how thoroughly old Dickerman had fathomed my precious secret, for in his own crabbed hand, he had set down the story of Elma Townsend, her abduction, her parentage, everything relating to her life since I first placed her in his care—the infernal old serpent!"

"You had the papers, so no harm was done, dad," ventured Bruno.

"You think so?" with a ghastly smile and grimace as his sound hand mechanically sought that wound in his side. "I'll tell you just how much harm was done, if you'll grant me time, boy!"

He went on to tell how the horse-thieves under Jimmy Gee looted the wagon, then gave it over to the flames. He told how he took Elma Townsend—then known as Elma Dickerman—to a snug retreat in the hills, the same spot to which he had directed his son, where he kept her safely waiting for that expected arrival.

He told how Jimmy Gee sent his men off with the horses they had stolen with instructions how to dispose of them before returning, Jimmy himself remaining with the Harriers.

"Because he thought he could wheedle me out of a share of the fortune I expected to make, of course—the idiot!" scowled Wild Hawk. "For, somehow, he either knew or suspected something of the truth. He may have caught me reading those papers, though I didn't suspect as much at the time, and though I told him I'd returned them to the girl, as being her private concerns."

"How did you come to suspect him?"

"I was looking for you, every hour, and thought it best to partly prepare Elma for the part she was to play when the parson should put in an appearance. For that purpose I led her outside the hut, and she snatched a gun from my belt when I was off my guard. She meant business, too, but Jimmy Gee knocked the pistol out of her grip with his knife; he can beat a Greaser casting, lad!"

"Well, he saved my life, for a fact. But Elma dropped the papers—or I pretended so, rather—while I was mastering her, and Jimmy Gee must have seen me pick them up, though he never let on. After I took the girl back and put her under guard, Jimmy tackled me for a divvy, and I kicked him out—figuratively speaking; wish I had done it in good earnest!"

"Then he cut you while trying to steal those papers?"

"I believe he did—some one did, that same night. I was sleeping. Something roused me, and I just caught a glimpse of a shadow hanging over me, and felt a hand in my bosom, when the steel bit deep! I yelled—there broke out a terrible uproar—the horses stampeded like mad! I was sick—deathly sick—for a little, and by the time I got steady, the ugly work was done! Jimmy was gone. The horses were gone. And—worst of all! the girl was gone, too!"

"Jimmy Gee must have had help. He couldn't have done all that by himself!"

"He had help, but I don't reckon he knew or even suspected it was coming, any more than I did my own self," gloomily nodded Wild Hawk. "I set the men at work, but it was a day before we got it all puzzled out, and could even begin to comprehend what we had to deal with. You remember I told you Chincapin Dan was joined by the Townsend boys and their mates? Well, either Dan or Jimmy cut me; Jimmy Gee for choice. And the boys, with Uncle Billy Breeze, ran off the girl between them."

"Four boys and two men, counting in Jimmy Gee. Did they get away with the entire band of Harriers, father?"

"No. We trailed them to a hole in a hill-top, like an old crater on a small scale. Jimmy Gee wasn't with them, else he lay mighty low. I had

a parley with them, long enough to make sure Elma was with the outfit, then fell back to get the reins in my own hands once more with the least possible cost.

"At first I thought to starve them out, since they had no water and could have but little grub. Then, as I remembered how much money hung on her head, I couldn't wait for that slow process. So I set the Harriers to work, and we were crowding them hard, when a gang of horsemen chipped in—Colonel Jo Townsend and his cowboys—no less!"

"How came they there?"

"You tell—I'll never!" growled Wild Hawk, savagely. "Enough that they came, and knowing the jig was up, I broke for the nearest horse and rode for dear life.

"Chincapin Dan cut my belt away, first shot, and I only saved a single pistol. I couldn't stop to pick 'em up—the Texans were coming, hot-foot! And so—I made for the river fast as my nag could hump it.

"When once hidden from the others, I turned in hopes of dropping that little devil, but he knocked my gun out of my hand, and crippled two fingers with the same shot—curses cover him from top to toe!"

Vicious rage choked his utterance for a time, but then Wild Hawk gave a fairly accurate account of what followed that disastrous shot, fully explaining his almost miraculous escape from the young avenger.

He was partly stunned by a stroke from the dying horse's hoof, and only broke away from the entangling reins when the carcass struck bottom just above the flat rock on which Black Bruno had that morning discovered his father.

The current swept him against the rock, then around one edge, and with the instinct of a drowning man, he clutched blindly at the obstacle.

His fingers closed on a bit of rock, and the current swept his feet around until his body lay parallel with the rock, his face turned upward and scraping the wet, moss-covered stone. One foot lodged against another ragged bit of rock, and to his intense amazement he found himself able to breathe, even while in utter darkness and seemingly buried in the water!

More through instinct than reasoning he clung to his place, for not until he heard the tread of his bitter enemy on the rock directly above his body, did he fully realize how narrowly he was divided from instant death.

He felt, rather than saw, Chincapin Dan sweeping a hand along the edge of the rock, but the strange cavity was further under the rock, and the boy trailer never once suspected the truth.

He told how he hung on, fearing to move, almost afraid to breathe, as long as he heard those heavy steps above him. They seemed to penetrate the stone itself, and he feared that the roof would crack above him to expose him, wholly defenseless, to his enemy.

It was a killing strain, in more senses than one, and he was almost exhausted when, long after he heard Chincapin Dan plunge into the river to swim back to land, he ventured to move his head from beneath the rock, he had hardly strength enough left to drag himself out upon the level surface.

"You know it all, now, Bruno," he said, after a pause to recover his uncertain breath. "All but one important point. Jimmy Gee told me that Major Ed Townsend was dead: killed by a fall from his horse, hardly a month ago! That leaves Elma sole heiress to the ranch, the vast herds and droves, the money—everything!"

"But she don't know that, as yet?"

"I don't think so, unless Chincapin Dan stole those papers. They were sealed when I gave them to her, and sealed when I took them back. But even if she *does* know—what matter? You were to marry her: you must marry her now!"

"If you say so, it shall be done, father," soothingly said Bruno, growing alarmed afresh by the plainly growing fever coming from those wounds. "And that you may be able to help enjoy the fruits, let me look to your hurts without further delay."

Even now Wild Hawk hung back, though it was only too plain he was rapidly losing his strength. But Bruno persisted, and shortly had muscular breast and side bared, caring for the ugly cut with steady and fairly skilled fingers.

When it came to examining the crippled hand, he found a still harder task before him. Not only was the wound—or wounds—more dangerous in themselves, but Wild Hawk stubbornly refused to permit his son to take the only course that could possibly avail aught; he swore that

he would rather die outright than suffer amputation.

"My pistol-hand, you whelp!" he hoarsely snarled, striking at the young man with his sound hand. "Would you make me a cripple for life? Would you see me come to—never, ye whelp!"

"I've got to do it, father, was the grave reply. "It's either a hand lost or a life gone. You'll have one hand left, but you've only got the one life, remember."

"Never—I'll die, sooner!"

"Then I'll take back the oath I gave you, Wild Hawk!" sternly declared Black Bruno, drawing back with arms folded tightly across his breast. "I'll never help you to your revenge. I'll tell Colonel Jo the whole story and send him to find the grave of his nephew, Elma's brother."

Fairly foaming at the mouth, Wild Hawk tried to snatch up the rifle standing near, but Bruno promptly foiled him in this. And then, while the crippled outlaw viciously cursed his son, his enemies, everything on earth or in the heavens above, Bruno Hawkings stood in silence, patiently awaiting a chance to repeat his warnings.

That time came, and he made the most of it. He seriously warned his father that speedy amputation of that horribly mangled hand could alone preserve his life. That each hour of delay only lessened his chances of escaping with life. And then he went on to remind Wild Hawk how precious that life ought to be to him, with his long-cherished dreams of vengeance still unfulfilled.

This finally turned the scale, and with his physical powers sadly depleted by that mad, insane fury, Wilder Hawkings yielded, with a hollow groan of mental agony at the thought of losing the good right hand which had for so many years served his reckless will so well.

That consent won at last, Bruno Hawkings hastily made his preparations for the operation, outwardly cold and unmoved, though he must have known the peril he was incurring.

His training stood him in good stead now, and the knowledge of wounds gained in years of wild, reckless, lawless life helped him set about the dread task with steady hands and a clear brain.

First, to soothe the wounded man as much as possible, he repeated his oath to faithfully carry out all instructions given him, and to make his revenge complete unless he should lose his own life while so endeavoring. He swore to hunt out Jimmy Gee and Chincapin Dan, and when found, to kill them both after the precise fashion his father might prescribe. All this he did while completing his grim preparations for the amputation.

Then, with the arm tightly bandaged, and with the last drops from his flask given to his father, he made the first cut.

And Wild Hawk, grating his strong teeth savagely, closed his eyes. After that he made not a sound to betray the torture he was enduring.

CHAPTER V.

BEFORE A LIVING AVALANCHE.

"PEARS like you're actin' mighty oneasy to-night, Marsh. What's the matter with ye, man?"

The person thus addressed gave a slight start at the first words, flashing a swift glance toward the speaker, then resuming his former restless stare into the gloom lying beyond the circle of light cast out by the camp-fire.

"Oneasy—that's jest the word, Dan," he muttered, drawing in a breath that caused his full chest to swell more prominently. "I be oneasy; but what at, gits me! Reckon it must be in the air!"

"Call it the lack o' somethin' under the belt, Lee," laughed the other, filling his pint cup with black coffee from the battered pot kept warm in the ashes close to the glowing coals. "Come, git your coffee, man. You'll need it to help prop your eyes open before day."

"That's mighty nigh what!" nodded the elder cowboy, squatting on his heels and helping himself to the true "range bracer."

"The critters is gener'ly oneasy the fu'st night, but the storm brewin' helps make it no better a mighty sight."

"Which was why I was thinkin', part way," nodded Marsh Lee, with a decidedly nervous glance over one shoulder into the comparative darkness reigning beyond the influence of that cheery fire. "Reckon some o' the 'lectricity hes soaked into me, the way I'm pricklin' all over!"

"Waal, pardner, you want to keep it close

kivered out o' sight while ridin' the rounds 'long o' me," chuckled his companion, half in jest, half in earnest as his keen eyes swept the stormy canopy over their heads. "'Twouldn't take sech a mighty sight to set the bunch off on a stampede sech a night as this."

"Wuss luck the gang o' us!" mumbled Marsh Lee. "Pity we couldn't 'a' waited fer a better fu'st night!"

"Business is business, pardner, an' we're jest deck-hands, so to speak. The boss said so, an' Kunnel Jo jest speaks once."

Those big black eyes opened widely as their owner gazed across his steaming tin cup at Chincapin Dan, and there was an echo of dull surprise in his tones as he added:

"Didn't reckon I was grumblin' on my own 'count, Dan? It all goes in the day's work with me. Only—a stampede on sech a night, makes a mighty hole in the profits o' a bunch o' market cattle like these!"

"We're here to hender any sech stampede from comin' off, Marsh Lee!"

"Sure! But kin we hender a crack o' thunder, or a whirlygust o' wind, or any sech? An' the way the critters act this evenin', a blind man could see that it wouldn't take much more'n that to set 'em off, tail-on-eend. An' so—better luck then I'm fearin', Chincapin Dan!"

Marsh Lee tossed his dingy tin cup, nodding toward his pardner for that occasion, as though inviting him to join in that rough-and-ready toast; but Chincapin Dan had risen to his feet and was now standing with back to the fire, slowly sweeping the clouded sky with his keen gaze.

A brief, peculiar smile swept across the darkly-handsome face of the cowboy squatting in the full glow of the firelight, but it was almost immediately eclipsed by the tin cup. When that was lowered, Marsh Lee looked calm and unmoved once more.

A really fine-looking fellow, as he arose erect, stretching his muscular arms and swelling his rounded chest; really handsome, too, when that mighty yawn subsided and left his features in their ordinary position.

Tall, athletic in build, yet with hardly a pound of waste flesh or fat about his person, Marsh Lee looked the beau ideal of a dashing cowboy. There was a touch of the "prairie dandy" in his make-up, but long before this night he had convinced his fellow-laborers on the Twin Ranch that beneath all that finery lay sterling metal; that the "dandy" in dress was none the less a "dandy" to work or to fight.

After all, he earned his wages after a manly fashion, and if he saw fit to spend the dollars to call attention to his own shape, whose business was that?

Judging by his face, Marsh Lee must have been over, rather than under, thirty years of age; but since that face was apt to deceive strangers in one way, why not in another?

His complexion was so dark, though clear and healthful, that at first meeting one instinctively set him down as a foreigner: a Spaniard, for instance. Yet Marsh Lee was purely American, and seemed proud to avow his nationality.

From whence he came, no one could say with certainty, since he did not volunteer the information, and as long as he did his duty no one cared to ask, point-blank.

He had been working for Colonel Jo Townsend, of the Twin Ranch, for several months past, and had come to be one of the most trusted cowboys on the list.

"Will we go out now, Chincapin, or wait fer t' others to come in?" he asked as he turned from the fire to add his coffee-cup to the little pile of "camp-traps" hard by.

"Wait, I reckon."

Chincapin Dan—for it was our old friend of "the crater"—turned from his scrutiny of the frowning heavens, bending over to pick up a glowing coal and deftly drop it into his short-stemmed pipe. Like all true lovers of the weed, he wanted a whiff or two after eating or drinking, and he knew that this would be his last chance before day dawned.

Though less than a year had elapsed since the swoop of the Wild Hawk and his Harriers down upon the little camp beside Rocky Creek, those passing months had worked considerable change in Daniel Dickerman.

There was the same wiry, almost bony figure, but it was taller and a good many pounds heavier than then. His face had aged, too, and grown more manly, though the same freckles remained, the same light, tow-colored hair showed beneath his cowboy hat. The greatest change showed in the keen, gray eyes, for while the rest was in fair keeping with his age—he could hardly have been older than seventeen,

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though Chincapin Dan himself could not name his exact age—they were the grave, earnest, resolute eyes of a man grown and tried.

After the rescue by Colonel Jo and his Texans, and after Elma had been acknowledged as a true Townsend, thanks to the confession of Todd Dickerman, which had been captured with Jimmy Gee when that rascal ran blindly into the grip of the dreaded cowboys, Chincapin Dan had accompanied the party to Texas.

Elma Townsend would listen to no less. As long as her memory ran back, she had called Dan brother; he was her brother still, no matter if different blood flowed in their veins. And though he felt out of place for a time, the rough points were gradually smoothed over, and now Dan felt entirely at home with the Townsends.

And that same lapse of time had greatly endeared the lad to his new "relatives." Though new to cowboy life, he had been quick to learn, while in hunting, trailing, and the different arts of woodsman life, he could give lessons to all save Uncle Billy Breeze himself.

These qualities naturally went a long way with "the boys," Frank and Will Townsend, while their cousin, "Curly" Clark Temple, had still another reason for liking the lad. No one else had so great an influence over Elma, and Curly Temple had lost his heart to her, even when he had merely seen her photograph. Only for Chincapin their meeting in the flesh would never have taken place. Only for him—and admitting so much, it is hardly to be wondered at that Dan was an especial favorite with the dashing young Texan, despite the difference in their age and stations in life.

Now, something less than a year after their first meeting, Curly Temple and Chincapin Dan, with half a dozen cowboys to assist them, were in charge of a "bunch" of marketable steers, rounded up to fill a special order from an old customer.

The bunch was still on the range, as is customary the "first night" out, as a partial aid to "using" them to being herded, and if the storm elements had been lacking, little fear would have been entertained by any of the company engaged in "circling" the bunch that night.

As it was, nearly every one felt that they would see a tough night of it, even if they escaped actual trouble with the restless animals, for on such a night, and after being just rounded up, cattle are peculiarly liable to a stampeding fever.

Shortly after the conversation recorded, Curly Temple and his mate for the night came in, and Chincapin Dan, after a hasty interchange or two, mounted his horse and rode away, with Marsh Lee, to perform their part of the night's work.

As he found himself alone, slowly circling around the edge of the "bunch," singing a wordless song in monotonous tones, Dan took more careful note of the cattle. Only a small part of the bunch were lying down, and even they seemed strangely restless, tossing their horned heads and uttering sounds of uneasiness.

"Lectricity, mebbe, but ef 'tis that, billy-beg-dog-goned ef I want any o' it in mine!" grimly muttered Dan, then lifted his voice higher in song, with implicit faith in the cowboy tradition that nothing else exerts such a calming influence over restless cattle.

His cowboy experience had been ample to acquaint him with the full peril attending a stampede, and Chincapin kept on the keen watch, his reins in hand, his feet firmly in the wooden stirrups, ready to wheel and flee for life at a moment's warning, or to dash along the edge of the maddened herd, trying to turn the leaders so as to eventually "wind 'em up."

So keenly on the alert was he that he quickly distinguished the fall of a horse's hoofs on the turf, and knowing that his mates on duty ought to be riding away from, rather than toward him at that moment, he dropped a hand on a revolver, peering through the gloom—to recognize Marsh Lee, a second later.

"Stiddy, you!" he called out in low, guarded tones. "What ye out o' line fer, pardner?"

"It's all right, Dan," came the answer in like carefully modulated tones. "Jest a word, then I'll git back to place ag'in."

"Spit it out, then, in a hurry. You kin see how oneasy the critters is growin', an'—"

"Mebbe I'm foolish, pard, but ef you'd jest take a squint over to'ards the timber when you git that fur."

"What's doin' that way?"

"Durned ef I know!" with an uneasy glance around them as he came closer to his night-mate. "Mebbe nothin'. Mebbe—waal, they's music in the air, or I'm gittin' looney—that's all!"

Without a word further to explain his mean-

ing, Marsh Lee wheeled his horse and trotted briskly away, soon vanishing in the darkness.

Dan was puzzled, but he dared not call out to ask further light. In their present uneasy state, even such a sound might send the cattle off on a break-neck stampede. And—

With a low ejaculation he wrenched up his horse, for directly ahead of him, though high up in the air, a sharp report sounded, and something like a rocket burst into a score of bright fireballs!

Then, as though in answer to a preconcerted signal, a hideous din burst from the opposite side of the herd—close to the timber island mentioned by Marsh Lee but a few seconds before.

There was a shrill yell, a rattle and crash, then a fiercely flaming shape darted from cover, rushing straight for the herd: a shape from whose fiery mass balls of colored fire flashed and spouted in every direction! Then—

The stampede began, heading direct for Chincapin Dan!

"Lively, mates!" he screamed at the top of his voice, jerking his horse around and fleeing until he could begin to put his own orders into execution. "Turn 'em—wind 'em up!"

"I'm with ye, pard!" cried Marsh Lee, dashing up at full speed and ranging alongside Chincapin Dan. "Didn't I tell ye so, pardner?"

"Then you reckon—"

"I know!" with a wild, reckless laugh, as he suddenly bent over and caught Dan by one foot, heaving him bodily out of the saddle, directly in front of that living avalanche. "Eat dirt, you bloodhound!"

CHAPTER VI.

A MESSENGER OF EVIL.

So swiftly, so deftly was this dastardly action performed, that not one man in a thousand could have foiled it.

And before Chincapin could possibly divine his intent, the foul deed was accomplished, and the dastard was riding away at full speed, looking back at his victim, whom only a miracle could save from meeting a frightful death beneath those clattering hoofs as the stampeding cattle came dashing blindly onward.

Caught off his guard, a strong hand gripping his foot and a powerful arm lifting him upward and hurling him sideways out of the saddle, Chincapin had barely time to utter one short scream before his head and shoulders struck the ground with a stunning shock.

His frightened horse, with a snort of terror, dashed swiftly away through the night, fleeing from that living avalanche, not a whit less deadly than the storied flood of the mountain-side.

"Good-by, Chincapin Dan o' the red hand!" laughed the assassin, as he saw the cattle reach and sweep over the spot where his recent mate had fallen. "All I'm sorry for is that I couldn't draw it out longer!"

Satisfied now that his cruel work was completed in that quarter, Marsh Lee turned his whole attention to getting himself out of the ugly scrape, at the same time acting so that, in case other eyes should notice him amid that horrible confusion, their owners could have no fault to find with his manner of procedure.

While fleeing before the maddened herd, he veered to one side, shouting and using both hands and whip like one seeking to turn that front to the right, the traitor kept a sharp lookout for Curly Temple and the other cowboys, although it was no part of his wishes to meet them again that night.

Not that he really feared discovery of his recent foul deed. He had laid his plans far too carefully for that, making sure that they two were alone on that side of the cattle before hurling Chincapin Dan out of his saddle. But such a meeting was possible, for he knew that each of the cowboys would strain every nerve to gain the front of the stampede, hoping to check that blind rush before many heads were lost.

As he looked back he could see no further signs of that fire-armed animal, but he laughed aloud as he did so. The tortured creature had performed the duty assigned it, and that was enough!

Brief though its part had been, it lasted long enough to set the four hundred head of steers in mad flight, frightening them so badly that little short of exhaustion or death itself could put an end to that mad stampede.

"Like a charm!" he chuckled, veering more sharply to the right, still keeping up his hollow pretense of trying to "mill" the herd, though as yet he had seen no signs of the other men. "One bloodhound down for good, and we can afford to lose a few horns—eh, dad?"

By this time more than a mile had been covered by the stampeding cattle, and Marsh Lee was nearing the right edge of the front, to laugh again as he noted a small patch of denser darkness not far ahead of his horse as it now headed. Even in this his calculations had proved perfect!

With a glance along the flank of the herd to make sure none of the cowboys were near enough to note his actions, Marsh Lee spurred his animal direct for the little clump of timber, drawing rein as he gained the cover, turning to watch that crazy mass sweep thunderingly past.

He caught an indistinct glimpse of one or more horsemen, trying to win the front, but he made no attempt to join them. Instead, as soon as the flying mass was fairly past the island, he turned his horse's head and trotted briskly along the edge of the deeply-scored ground, toward the deserted camp-fire.

As he passed within a few hundred yards of the spot where he had hurled Dan out of the saddle, he gazed intently in that direction, but the dust torn up by those hundreds of hoofs hung heavily on the air, and he could distinguish nothing.

"See you later, Chincapin!" he chuckled, with savage triumph, as he nodded his head that way. "Other business presses, just now! Time enough to weep over your remains when they've swept 'em up in a quart basket!"

He gave the still burning camp-fire a wide berth, breaking into a gallop as he left that point behind him, only drawing rein when a full half-dozen miles away from the spot where the stampede took place.

Dismounting, he used his knife to cut the rear cinch, or girth, in such a manner that an inspection would bring belief that the fibers had broken. He turned the saddle so that it hung under the animal's belly, broke the bridle-reins, then sent the frightened creature away with a vicious stroke of his whip, its head in the direction of the stampede.

He ripped his garments, here and there, then picked out a spot bare of grass, rolling over and over, mingling dirt with his hair and streaking his face with dust, and blood taken from a small bladder carried in his pocket, laughing the while as though hugely enjoying his grim masquerade.

"Nothing like doing things up brown when you begin!" he said to himself. "Mebbe I'm not near so pretty as usual, but I'm gitting thar in grand shape, all the same!"

When satisfied that he was looking dilapidated enough to carry out the dastardly scheme he had so long and so carefully planned, Marsh Lee looked to his revolvers, making sure they were in perfect working condition.

"I ought, by rights, to have lost them, too, in the tumble, but I'm not taking quite such long chances!" he muttered, as he strode briskly away in the direction of the Twin Ranch.

"Colonel Joe is mighty apt to be red hot when he hears the news, and he might take a notion to lift my roof on general principles. Then—well, he's worth more living than dead, just now, but a fellow can't stand everything, you know!"

There was a little uneasiness in his mind as he came within view of the Townsend place, known far and wide as the "Twin Ranch," that being the title given the place when "Major Ed" and "Colonel Jo" first started in the cattle business. But as he detected no signs of disturbance, saw no lights save those naturally to be expected at that early hour of the night, Marsh Lee slowed his pace and took time to rehearse the doleful tale he had to tell.

"Unsuspecting as lambs!" he chuckled, as he drew nearer, bracing himself for the ordeal which was now close at hand. "I expected as much, but some of the boys might possibly have got in ahead of me. Now—open your ears and eyes, Colonel Jo, for I'm coming—hot-foot!"

He broke into a run as he muttered those words, and taking on all the seeming of a man woefully wearied and in the last stages of exhaustion, he cried out in husky tones:

"Hello the house! Kunnel Jo! Kunnel Townsend!"

A number of hounds set up a yelping, rushing toward that sorely dilapidated figure, but Marsh Lee paid them no attention, knowing well enough that he was safe from harm as soon as they could catch the scent of an old acquaintance.

"Hello! Kunnel Jo!"

His voice was hoarse and unnatural, but loud enough to attract attention from the ranch, and a stalwart figure was outlined against the light coming through an open door.

"Who calls? What's wanted?" demanded a deep, manly voice, its owner grasping a revolver at his hip.

"Jest—good Lawd!" gasped Marsh Lee, staggering into the fan of light, then sinking to the ground like one wholly spent.

"What—Lee, is it?" ejaculated the colonel, springing forward and bending over the panting cowboy.

"What's—left—stampede, kunnell!" gasped the cunning actor, his head sinking to the ground as though his last remnant of bodily strength had expired.

"What stampede? Not the market bunch?" sharply demanded Townsend, gripping an arm tightly and partially raising the trembling wretch.

"Yes—gone—rustlers—"

Colonel Jo dropped that arm, rising erect and discharging his revolver into the air so rapidly that the six shots blended into one prolonged roll. Then he sprung away to the house proper, sharply ordering back two startled girls who came rushing to the front.

"Keep inside, girls! Nothing serious. Just calling in the hands," he hastily cried, as he snatched up a decanter of brandy from where it stood on the sideboard.

With this restorative he quickly returned to Marsh Lee, who was lying in a seeming faint, shivering from top to toe like one completely used up. And with an energy that might have endangered one really as far gone as the cowboy pretended, Colonel Jo raised his head, forcing the mouth of the decanter between his teeth, pouring forth the fiery contents so liberally that the traitor was forced to "revive" in order to escape suffocation.

"Rustlers—stampede—come to tell—"

"Anybody hurt? Any shooting?"

"Don't—boss fell—"

Colonel Jo stifled a curse as he dropped both head and decanter, but he managed to hurriedly utter:

"Brace up as quick as you can, Lee. I'll get the boys ready for work. By that time you must be able to tell your story, or—"

Even in such intense excitement, he could not actually threaten a man who seemed so utterly helpless as this, and as the men about the ranch came rushing up, alarmed by those rapid shots, he bade them catch up their horses and arms for hot work.

"Lee reports a stampede, by rustlers," he said in curt explanation, as he turned back to the house for more weapons and an outfit more suitable for a campaign in the saddle.

Although, at that day, such alarms were by no means so common as in earlier times, the cowboys lost very few minutes in preparing for work, and as soon as Colonel Jo could change his clothes for others fitted for hard riding, the cowboys had his horse in readiness, together with their own.

Marsh Lee, too, knowing that he must not overdo the matter, seemed in a measure revived and able to tell his woeful story.

This he did with tolerable accuracy, as far as he went, though he covered over much of his own doings, as a matter of course. But, to make up for this, he gave a far better description of the fiery creature, which had been the prime cause of the stampede, than any of his recent companions could have done, had they been asked.

"It come out o' the timber—you know—the Dead Cross," he explained, alluding to the blasted tree standing in the center of the grove, a huge limb of which, when struck by lightning, had fallen into a fork and remained balanced, giving the whole a rude resemblance to a cross. "Peared like it must 'a' bin a boss, kivered 'ith dry hides from the rattle, an' fastened all over 'ith roaming candles an' pop-crackers, an' sich-like fireworks!"

"Was there any shooting?" demanded Colonel Townsend, thinking of his son, Frank, and nephew, Curly Temple.

"Ef they was, I didn't hear none. I was nigh the furdur side, an' 'course I tuck to turn in the cattle ef I could. But—waal, my critter tripped in a coyote hole, or some sech, an' we all went down in a heap! It knocked me cold, kunnell, an' when I got back ag'in, they wasn't ary thing in sight but jest my own durn mis'able self—so they wasn't, now!"

He threw an appealing whine into his husky tones, like one who feared sharp reproof if no worse, but Colonel Jo never for a moment doubted his perfect truth. And knowing how valuable time was, in such an emergency, he bade Lee follow as soon as he was able, then dashed off at the head of his men to the rescue.

Marsh Lee rose staggeringly to his feet as two

girls came toward him, humbly bowing as the eldest and tallest hurriedly spoke:

"Tell me—were any of our people hurt in the stampede?"

"Waal, miss, ye see—I'm mighty 'fraid they was one hurt!" he spluttered, seemingly frightened by her passionate gesture at his drawing commencement.

"Who was it? Speak out—oh, tell me, quick!"

"Waal—I see one pore critter go down jest afore I did. An' he didn't git up ag'in, though I watched the cattle tromple clean over whar he tumbled!"

CHAPTER VII.

A TREACHEROUS GUIDE.

WITH feigned reluctance Marsh Lee gave utterance to those cruel words, shrinking back a little from the maiden who, with gesticulating hand, was urging him to speak.

This was Elma Townsend, the taller, more womanly-looking of the twain; but pale though her fair face was, it betrayed scarcely more agitation than that of Cora Mason, her intimate friend, sole daughter of a prosperous neighbor.

"You mean—who was it, man?" cried Elma, with a stamp of her foot.

For an instant it seemed as though she would grasp the stammering wretch with her white hands, to shake the truth from his reluctant lips. But before she could do this, Marsh Lee spoke, fearing to dally longer lest his plans be deranged by the coming of others from the house.

"Chincapin Dan—pore critter!"

Elma recoiled, her face very pale, her lips parted as she gasped for breath, though she had partly expected this announcement. And Cora Mason, fully as deeply moved though she showed it after an entirely different fashion, sharply cried:

"Don't—he's lying, Elma! Lying to cover up his own cowardice in running away from the danger he left better men to face! You know you are not speaking true—are you, sir?"

Both beginning and ending were strongly characteristic of the girl; not yet out of her sixteenth year. The first sharp, almost fierce, the last appealingly, her voice soft and quavering as she laid a plump little paw on the ragged sleeve of the cowboy.

"Would I dast to fetch sech a lie back to Kunnell Jo, ma'am?" meekly protested Lee, his voice sinking to a doleful snuffle. "Would I dast even to name sech a turrible thing to—to the likes o' you, Miss Elmy?"

Elma gave a start at this mention of her name, but she was past taking offense at such timid familiarity, even had she recognized it at the time. All she could think of was *under those cruel hoofs!*

"Tell me—all you can," she forced herself to say, though each word threatened to choke her, so intense was her emotion. "You saw—there can be no mistake?"

"But—I jest whispered it to Kunnell Jo, an' he said I wasn't to let on any, whar the wimmen-folk—an' now I hev done it!"

Marsh Lee clapped both hands to his unruly lips, staggering away where the shadows afforded still better concealment from those who might still remain in the house. As he fully expected, the girls followed him closely. He had said far too much not to say more. They must know the very worst without further delay.

"You've got to—just got to tell everything, sir!" declared Cora, her red curls flying, her blue eyes glowing through the gloom. "If we can—oh, can't we do something for poor Danny?"

"Heaven help him—and pity us!" moaned Elma, seemingly on the point of giving way under the weight of this heavy blow, coming just when the skies looked clearest to her young hopes.

"Mebbe tain't quite so bad, Miss Elmy," huskily ventured Marsh Lee, as he gently touched one trembling arm with his dirty hand. "Mebbe—"

"Tell us all, and let us see if there is a ray of hope left!" the maiden flashed, drawing back from the contact with an involuntary shiver. "How did it all happen?"

The cowboy mumbled something about Colonel Jo, but his evident reluctance to speak seemed to spur Elma on. She put her agitation away, and almost harshly bade him speak.

"I will take the blame on my own shoulders if Colonel Townsend feels angry. Speak: how did my brother fall?"

"Him an' me was mates fer the night, you see,

Miss Elmy, an' you, Miss Mason. An' that fetched us nighest each other when the stampede bu'sted loose. An' so—we was tryin' to wind the critters up. And fu'st I knowed—he went down in a heap!"

"And you ran away without even stopping to help!" indignantly flashed Cora, in her excitement actually shaking a doubled hand in the face of the schemer.

"Do I look like I hed sech an easy time of it, ladies?" whined Lee, throwing out his arms and making his rags flutter in the night air. "Ef they was light 'nough to see 't all, you couldn't see the shape o' me fer the cuts an' bruises an'—"

"Is there no hope?" huskily interrupted Elma. "Can we do nothing at all toward— Show us where poor Danny fell, I beg of you!"

Though ordinarily one of the most sympathetic of girls, Elma could spare no thoughts for a stranger, just then. And with this awful cloud hanging over her head, all others were strangers to her.

"You rig her pony—I'll saddle my own!" impulsively cried Cora, springing away toward the stable in which the private saddle-nags were habitually kept, separate from the animals used for ranch work.

Elma caught the contagion, and though Marsh Lee feebly mumbled some objections, he was laughing in his sleeve as he shuffled after the maidens. This was precisely what he had wished, though hesitating to mention, until his words had worked them up to the proper pitch; unless half distracted, Elma might well have hesitated before taking such a risky step.

On more than one occasion of late she had had cause to sharply resent the presumption shown by the swart-faced cowboy. His eyes, even more plainly than his tongue, had betrayed his secret: that he was madly in love with the rich heiress.

All that was forgotten now. She could think only of poor Danny, the only brother she had known in her life. She staggered blindly as she thought of him—*under those terrible hoofs!*

Fearing lest she fall, Marsh Lee caught Elma in his arms, but before he could say aught the maiden freed herself, that unwelcome contact lending her strength once more. And her voice was almost harsh as she bade him hasten to prepare a horse for her use.

"Ef you say so, ma'am," humbly mumbled the cowboy. "Kunnell Jo'll be red-hot, mebbe, but fer your—"

"I'll stand all blame. Don't talk—act! Don't you see that this horrible suspense is—killing me!"

Further acting could do no good, and Marsh Lee sprung to work with an ardor and skill that produced two horses—one belonging to Colonel Jo, for his own use, with the favorite mare for Elma herself—as soon as deft-fingered Cora Mason brought out her own mustang, ready for the road.

"Mebbe the kunnell left word—ef the house-folks try to stop us, ma'am?" hesitated Lee, seemingly in doubt.

"A blizzard couldn't stop me!" flashed Cora, springing into her saddle with an activity such as a cowboy might have envied. "Hurry, you ras—dear man! Think of poor Danny lyin'—"

Her voice choked, and Elma echoed back the sob that came from the passionate little maiden's throat. She knew how ardently Cora loved Chincapin Dan, though as yet the secret belonged only to those two. And now that Cora seemed to despair, how could she hope longer?

"Ef you'd jest 'low me to sneak the critters 'round the back way, whar nobody wouldn't 'spect nothin', ma'am, why— Thar's the nigger cook, now!"

Marsh Lee with difficulty choked back the fierce curse that rose to his throat as he saw and heard fat "Aunt Betsy" at the front door.

"Miss Elmy! O-oh, Miss Elmy, chicken! Whar is ye, honey? Whar— Good Lawd look down 'um 'bove!"

For Marsh Lee, knowing that discovery was inevitable now, since Cora Mason had sent her horse plunging forward into the light cast out by the open door and windows, picked Elma up and tossed her into the saddle, leaping upon the other horse, catching her reins and dashing away at full speed.

Aunt Betsy saw them, and though the gloom hid faces, she could not well mistake those garbs fluttering in the breeze.

"Don't stop—she'll hender ye ef ye do!" hoarsely cried Lee, as he heard above the trampling of hoofs. "Kunnell Jo must 'a' bid her keep ye back, an'—"

"Faster!" cried Elma, freeing her reins with

a sharp jerk. "Lead the way direct to where my brother—to where you saw him last!"

The treacherous cowboy obeyed, at least until fairly out of sight and hearing of the ranch. Then he slackened his pace to one through which he could make his voice intelligibly heard.

"It's all right out here, Miss Elmy, but when we git furdur out, you must 'low me to take the lead. They's heaps o' coyote holes, an' ef your critter should tromple into one of 'em—Waal, I don't want to tote no sech news as *that* back to Kunnel Jo—I don't now!"

If his words were heard, scant heed was paid to them by either maiden at first. While that mad fever lasted, they *must* ride—they could not even think of caution. And yet, as they thought of what might await their coming—oh, it was horrible!

For mile after mile that mad chase lasted, then Marsh Lee sternly enforced his vainly-repeated caution: they must slacken their reckless pace, and permit him take the lead.

"Fer we're comin' to Coyote Range, an' as I said fu'st off, I *can't* take no sech wide chances, ladies!"

That wild run had in a measure had its effect, and when he took that masterful tone, the girls yielded. Still he rode briskly enough, keeping only a few yards in advance until—

"Stiddy! you're our meat, critter!"

A sharp, ugly challenge to come out of the gloom, and rendered all the more emphatic by the sudden up-springing of several phantom-like shapes from the tall grass that grew in the little swale across which the trio were making their way just then.

"Who—cl'ar the track, you!" hoarsely cried Marsh Lee, only to fling up his arms and tumble from the saddle as a bright flash lit up the night for an instant.

At the same instant strong hands caught the horses ridden by the girls, while other hands guarded against their making use of any pistol with which they might happen to be armed.

"Stiddy, ladies!" added that same harsh voice, "Kickin' won't help ye any, an' squealin's 'g'in'st the law. Ef you'll play sensible—Shet thar pipes, mates!"

Swiftly the poor girls were torn from the saddle and strong hands muffled their mouths, cutting short their screams of terror, born of that sudden assault.

"Ye would hev it, wouldn't ye?" snarled the man who seemed to take the lead of his fellows, thrusting his bearded face close to the eyes of Elma Townsend. "Heap sight better'n ef you'd come 'long peaceable, ain't it!"

"What shell we do with the man-critter, boss?"

"Make sure he's cold meat, then leave him fer the coyotes!"

"They's a hole in his cabeza big 'nough to sling a coyote through 'thout techin' ary side, boss!" grimly laughed the other ruffian, bending over the prostrate figure of the cowboy.

"What else ye reckon? Didn't I pull onto him?" snarled the chief. "Stiddy, you with the bosses! I'll ride one, an' tote this lump o' sweetness. Hand her up when—now!" as he sprang into the saddle and bent over with ready arms.

Elma was placed in his grasp, and only pausing to see that another of the ruffians took Cora up before him, the chief rascal trotted away through the night, heading for a not distant clump of timber.

A couple of minutes brought them to the island, near the center of which burned a small but cheery camp-fire. And dismounting at the edge, the burly ruffian bore Elma to the red glow, there placing her on her feet, but keeping a firm grip on her arm the while.

Both Elma and Cora were tied to small trees at the edge of the opening, and left to themselves for several minutes. Then a tall, well-clad man stepped before Elma, bowing with a mocking laugh as he said:

"Welcome as flowers in May, dear Elma! You start? Is it possible that you have forgotten Wild Hawk and his son, Bruno? *Your bridegroom*, sweetness? Have you no welcome for me, darling?" and he pulled the muffler from her blanched lips.

"You cur!" she panted. "*I know you now, Marsh Lee!*"

CHAPTER VIII.

UNDER A THOUSAND HOOF.

Too late to save himself, or to strike a blow for vengeance, Chincapin Dan recognized the foul treachery that was at work.

Not until he felt that steel-like grip on his foot—not until he caught a glimpse of those

flaming black eyes as he was lifted clear of the saddle and sent headlong to the ground, directly in the path of that living avalanche.

And then he could do naught save send forth one brief scream of mingled rage and fear!

He fell on his head and shoulders with a shock that partially stunned him, though he had life enough left to feel and recognize the shaggy animal that, with a subdued howl of terror, leaped almost into his face as it left its burrow and glided, phantom-like, away from that menacing death.

It seemed that nothing short of a miracle could save Chincapin Dan from meeting a frightful death beneath those clattering hoofs, the front line of which was hardly fifty yards away as he struck the earth. Yet that very miracle offered itself!

More by instinct than through reasoning, Chincapin Dan knew that the coyote had just leaped out of its burrow, close to the edge of which he had fallen. In fact, one hand sunk into the sloping opening as he flung it out in an instinctive effort to save his head.

And, still through instinct, he rolled over, to feel his feet drop under the edge of a round-topped boulder, beneath which the prairie-wolf had made its den.

Lucky for him that he was slender, with supple limbs, else even that frail chance would have been of no avail, for, as habitual, the coyote had only burrowed a short distance in a direct line, then curving its hole abruptly.

Thrusting his legs as far as possible into the narrow passage, crowding his slender body tightly after, drawing in his head and covering it as much as possible with his doubled arms and hands, Chincapin Dan drew a long breath, and—

With that cullen, frightened roar which invariably heralds the coming of such a stampede, the cattle were upon him!

The ground shook and shivered beneath those thousand hoofs. Thunder seemed coming from the center of the earth. Then—

A shower of dirt fell upon the mouth of the wolf-burrow, and with a broken bellow, the foremost steer tripped over the rock, striking the hard ground beyond fairly on its head, snapping its neck, and dying as though stricken by lightning!

Another followed, its hoofs fairly scraping an arm of the cowering youth. And then there was confusion indescribable!

In their blind panic the cattle could not see the obstructing rock or the dead steer just beyond, and it was only when several more had fallen, two to never rise in life again, that the obstacle grew large enough to split the front of the herd, sending the rest on in parallel waves, to join again when a few yards beyond the rock.

But after that first trip and fall, Chincapin Dan knew naught of how he came to be spared. A hoof struck him on the head, slitting the scalp as with a keen knife, knocking the few remaining senses clear out of his brain.

Perhaps it was better so. No mortal in his full sensibilities could have remained motionless while that terrible avalanche was pouring over and past him. Even the most abject terror could not have paralyzed his limbs sufficiently to hinder him from insuring death by making a mad effort to escape it!

The living tide flowed on, leaving three dead and frightfully mangled steers lying close to the red rock—one of those prairie marvels which are so frequently to be found scores of miles from any other rocky formation.

That furious thunder swept away through the darkness, growing less and less stunning with each passing second, then gradually dying out in the distance.

The atmosphere was heavily laden with dust, but this slowly settled nearer and closer to the earth, the breeze too faint to bear it away. Yet not a sound came from under that red rock to hint at life lingering there!

Marsh Lee passed by, gazing toward that spot, but feeling too confident that his foul work was surely accomplished to even think of wasting time, to investigate.

Minute after minute! Not a sound—not a movement!

Surely that red boulder was fated to be a tombstone!

But at length, how long after his fall Chincapin Dan never knew, the movement came. A bony hand was spasmodically flung out, lying dimly on the bare earth, almost touching one of the dead cattle.

A choking gasp—a shivering through the loose earth flung into the mouth of the coyote-burrow.

"Water—I'm chokin'—chok—"

Another hand came forth, followed by a human head, dirt dripping from the matted hair. Hair that was stiff on one side from the blood which had soaked up the loose dirt until the ugly scalp-wound was fairly closed with nature's plaster.

Only a head, arms and shoulders. Then, moaning huskily in his semi-consciousness, Chincapin Dan lay motionless save as his lungs feebly labored to perform their duty.

For many minutes he lay thus, unconscious of the passage of time, hardly conscious of lingering life. If he could be said to think at all, it was of water—clear, sparkling, tinkling water!

Thus he lay until there came a faint, peculiar tremor through the night-cool earth to his ears: a tremor which did more than aught else to revive the poor fellow, for it reminded him of that frightful avalanche which had swept over his head!

"Stampede wind 'em up!" he huskily gasped, lifting his upper person on his weak, trembling arms, and staring dizzily around him.

The tremor vanished, but it was only because his face was no longer touching the ground. Almost immediately he caught it again, growing clearer and more distinct until he recognized the direction from whence it came; the same from where that stampede had started!

Only instinctively did he recognize this. He fancied the herd was coming back, and with a desperate effort he dragged himself to his feet, leaning against the boulder and trying to shout aloud as he waved his arms.

Then—just as his senses reeled and failed him once more, his husky cries were heard, and Colonel Townsend wrenched up his foaming steed with a wild cry of mingled alarm and joy.

"Who is it? What's the matter, man?" he cried, leaping from the saddle almost before his well-trained horse came to a halt. "Dan—my God! what's happened you, lad?"

But Chincapin Dan did not hear that anxious cry, nor feel the strong yet tender arms that caught him just as he was slipping headforemost over the smooth rock.

With a sharp shout Colonel Jo checked those following hard upon his heels, and by his orders a little fire was hastily kindled by sacrificing an extra garment or two, by the light of which he quickly examined the hurts his adopted nephew had received.

"Don't say he's—He'll pull through, father!" huskily asked Will Townsend, the younger of the brothers, both of whom were with the rescuing party.

There was no immediate reply, for though he had found no broken bones as he ran his hands hastily over those wiry limbs, Colonel Jo felt sorely uneasy at this strange insensibility. Until he found that ugly scalp wound, and assured himself that the bones of the skull had not been fractured by the glancing blow.

"No, he's only stunned by a fall against this rock, I reckon," was his decision, with a long breath that expressed something of his great relief. "Give me a flask *sombody*—quick!"

He poured a few drops into the parted lips of the lad, then filled his palm and tenderly bathed face and skull, knowing that, though the fiery liquor might set the blood to flowing anew at first, such a dressing was better than pure water for the first.

Dan shivered as the strong liquid bit and stung his torn scalp, and shortly after he opened his eyes, trying to lift his head as he muttered something about "windin' 'em up!"

"That's all right, Danny, lad," cheerfully cried Colonel Jo, propping the bewildered youth up against the rock which had, under Heaven, saved his life. "They're all wound up tight as a knot. And I'm mighty glad you're not—this trip, old man!"

"I done—my level—best!" panted Dan, huskily.

"Don't I know it, my man? You always do your level best, and that beats any other man's, too! So—can't you just say if there was any shooting going on with the other boys? Was it a simple stampede, or did the rustlers jump your camp?"

"I didn't see—ef I hed a drink—water!"

A canteen brought along by a cowboy who—wonderful to say!—was a strict abstainer from anything more intoxicating, was handed the colonel, who held it to those parched lips. Chincapin Dan drank eagerly, then his bloodshot eyes closed and his head drooped, sleepily.

With difficulty Colonel Jo smothered an oath in its birth. He wanted to know just how the stampede had come about, but even had he been hard-hearted enough to persist in questioning

the thoroughly exhausted youth, he knew that such would be of no avail just then.

Yet with each passing minute the stampede was sweeping on, and already the cattle must be many miles ahead of them! And—what if the "rustlers" had taken a hand in that night's work? What if Curly Temple and his little band of cowboys were even then being slain as they fought for the bunch?

"I can't lose any more time, but—Will!" turning abruptly to his youngest son, who stood gazing sorrowfully into the face of his friend.

"Yes, father!"

"You'll have to stand by Danny, and let the rest of us go on. All he needs is time and quiet to pick up again, and with you to watch and care for him, I'll know he's all right. You'll do it, lad?"

Will hesitated for an instant, a shade of disappointment coming into his round, honest face, for, boy-like, he had often dreamed of meeting the "rustlers" in battle array, and now that the chance seemed offering itself, it was particularly hard to give it up. And none the less so because his elder brother, Frank, was already in the saddle, rifle in hand, itching to be off along the trail.

"It's a trust you ought to be proud of, Will," quickly added his father, reading that face aright, and deftly touching the right string. "I'd sooner you than any of the boys. You know how precious Danny is to Elma—to all of us, lad?"

"All right: I'll stay with him, father. But—if you do meet up with any rustlers, be sure and send 'em one card with my compliments!"

"You bet I will, my hearty!" cried Colonel Jo, leaping into the saddle with an activity few men of his age could have emulated. "And I'll bring back a live one for you to practice on, too!"

Will Townsend heaved a mighty sigh of regret as he watched the horsemen fade away in the darkness, but then he turned to his duty, trying to forget all else in that thought.

After all, this might have been a greater trial. He had learned to love Chincapin Dan with a true brotherly affection since the tragic night of their first meeting beside Rocky Creek, and the thought that Dan would partly owe his restoration to his care, helped smooth over that rough place.

He had a whisky-flask, in addition to the canteen of water, and though he had no means of keeping up the fire, now extinguished, he could see enough to serve his purpose.

He would hardly have been a boy, had he been content to let Chincapin Dan lie undisturbed, though such rest would almost certainly be the best medicine for him. And so, using the liquids in alternation, he shortly had Chincapin Dan roused up once more. And as he poured boyish questions upon the youth, he at length touched by chance on the one sure method of starting that sluggish brain into activity once more.

And that was by mentioning the name of Marsh Lee!

CHAPTER IX.

CHINCAPIN DAN ON THE TRAIL.

"WHAR is he? Show him to me, an' I'll—" hoarsely cried the youth, staggering to his feet and glaring around through the darkness.

This was still deep, though growing less complete, thanks to the gradual breaking away of the clouds overhead. Here and there a glimpse could be caught of a twinkling star, and though a mist-like veil seemed to envelop that portion of the plain, there was light enough to show Chincapin Dan that he and Will Townsend were alone together.

"Who? Lee, you mean?" asked Will, far from comprehending what that sudden excitement covered. "He's gone with the rest of the men, after the bunch, of course."

"Don't—let me try to think a bit."

Chincapin Dan spoke slowly, painfully. He sat down on the edge of the green-marked red boulder, bowing his aching head in his hands, gripping it tightly as though to concentrate his thoughts.

And then, little by little, the ugly facts began to come back to his memory.

Careless, blunt-speaking though he usually was, Will Townsend did not try to hasten that process. He instinctively divined that something out of the ordinary had occurred to work such a complete change in his light-hearted friend.

"He done it! He done it a-purpose!" presently ejaculated Chincapin Dan, and catching at the words, Will curiously asked:

"Who done what? Which and whyfore? When and how, and what in thunder-and-guns

are you trying to get through you, anyway, Dan? Confound it, man! do you want to see me split clean up the back through an excess of queeriosity? Then—spit it out in a gob!"

"He done it—Marsh Lee," muttered Chincapin Dan, staring at vacancy. "He rid up an' said—I can't jest fix what he did say!"

"Never mind what he said; what did he do?"

"Ketched my foot an' chucked me clean out o' the saddle! An' thar was the critters comin' jest ahind. An' I drapped—was it a coyote? 'Pears like—"

He was still far from being his usual self, and for the moment he forgot all about the treacherous cowboy, bending forward and peering along the ground as he tried to solve the mystery of the wild animal whose memory had suddenly obtruded itself.

"I know now!" and his wiry figure shivered sharply as he detected the hole which lay close to the red boulder. "I was in yender. The stampede run right over me, an'—"

"Glory to amen!" spluttered Will, wide-eyed at the mere thought. "You didn't—they couldn't have run over you, boy! Why—you're alive, ain't ye, man?"

He gripped an arm as though to assure himself of this fact, and his incredulity, joined to his ludicrous amazement, helped to clear that sadly-befogged brain.

Chincapin Dan laughed faintly, though his hands were unsteady as they caught and pressed that of Will Townsend.

"That ain't the grip of a dead man, is it, Will? But ef I'm livin' tain't no fault o' his—double cuss him all over!"

Will gave vent to a snort of utter disgust as he wrenched his hands free and put both behind his back, spreading his legs to support his sturdy body as he deliberately spoke.

"If you wasn't a sick man, put in my charge by Colonel Jo, Daniel Dickerman Townsend, I'd just up and shake the truth out o' you in gobs and hunks, and—Can't you even begin to tell a fellow what in thunder-and-guns you've been trying to do?"

"I'm tryin' yit—tryin' to make out why he done it!" frowned Dan, brushing a hand repeatedly across his wrinkled forehead. "I know he did do it! I know he rid up an' said somethin'. I know he ketched me by the foot an' upshot me out o' the saddle. But why? What fer?"

"Who did that? Not Marsh Lee?"

"Marsh Lee—ef that's his name. 'Pears like—"

"You dreamt it all, Dan! Why—Lee brought word to us that the cattle had stampeded, and he said something about getting a fall that had bunged him all up, and—I didn't catch just what, for I was so hot to get in saddle, you know. But—he couldn't have done all that, Dan; you just dreamt it, man!"

Chincapin Dan caught Will by the arm, his fingers closing like the jaws of a vise as he hoarsely demanded:

"Whar is he? Was he 'long with Kunnel Jo when you come here?"

Will shook his head, but before he could say aught, a harsh, angry, yet frightened cry broke from the throat of the other.

"You didn't—he wasn't left back thar at the ranch? Don't tell me that, Will Townsend!"

"Father told him to follow us as soon as he could pick up a bit. What's biting you, anyway, Dan?"

Chincapin staggered back and sunk down on the rock, covering his face with his hands, panting heavily, irregularly, shivering from top to toe with powerful emotion.

"Now I know! It hit me fu'st-off, but I couldn't place 'em! Them eyes—the eyes o' Wild Hawk!"

"Now I know you're going crazy, man!" laughed Will, though with a trace of anger underlying his words. "Wild Hawk! Didn't you shoot the rascal, your own simple self, man alive? Didn't you see him die?"

"Wild Hawk's eyes, I tell ye, boy!" harshly repeated Chincapin Dan, springing to his feet, and after a quick glance around them, starting away in the direction of the Twin Ranch. "Ketch up your hoss an' come on! Thar's trouble—trouble fer Elmy—pore gal!"

Despite himself, Will Townsend was impressed by those words and looks, though he still fancied Chincapin Dan was wandering in his wits, as he might well be after all he had undergone. But he quickly caught up his horse, left free on the plain with trail-rope dragging, and climbing into the saddle, he set after the young man, who was hurrying away.

"Hold on, Danny, if you're bound to go," he cried. "My nag'll tote double, I reckon, and—"

"Look yender?" interrupted his friend, point-

ing across the level toward a dimly-visible object. "Ain't that a critter? My eyes is all gummed up 'long o' the dirt so, I can't—My hoss, fer sure!"

A tremulous, uncertain neigh came floating across the level, and Chincapin Dan gave a shrill whistle by which he was accustomed to summon his carefully trained horse. Another neigh answered him, but the animal, not yet recovered from its scare, gave no further signs of compliance.

"It's your critter, sure enough, Dan, and I'll rope him for you in a brace of shakes said Will, moving forward. "Heap sight better'n riding double with a boy!"

The task was not a difficult one, though the frightened horse did fight shy for a short time. But the instant it felt the noose drop over its head it yielded without a struggle, and Chincapin Dan was soon safely seated in his own saddle once more.

"Now we can pick up the gang in plenty time to have a crack at the fun, don't you reckon, Danny?" almost coaxingly observed Will, hanging back as his mate turned toward Twin Ranch.

"You kin ef you will, but I've got to go thar—got to, man!" with intense anxiety shaking his voice. "I know them eyes—I know he's kin to Wild Hawk, an' that shows he means more'n jest layin' me out! He's plottin' evil to Elmy. An' you left him thar—not a man-soul nigh fer to hender his devilment!"

Will uttered a subdued howl of disgust as his last feeble hope fled. Colonel Jo had bidden him stand by Chincapin, and though the latter was moving with as much activity as he had ever displayed, he was just so surely in need of a guardian.

"Cracked—cracked wide open!"

He showed this belief by the closeness with which he watched his companion as they rode briskly along together, but if he saw, Chincapin Dan never mentioned the fact, nor tried to remove an unjust suspicion.

He had far more important matters to think of.

Although he had never actually liked Marsh Lee, until that night he had never so much as suspected him of playing a part, or of being other than what he claimed: a gay, dashing, reckless cowboy, whose deepest fault lay in a love of display and of boasting while in his cups. But now—

"Ef he's brung harm to Elmy, I'll kill him by inches!" he cried, shaking a clinched hand above his head as he urged his horse on at greater speed, for once showing no mercy to a jaded animal.

"What harm can he work, Danny?" soothingly asked Will, keeping close alongside, ready to grapple with his friend should his suspected madness threaten harm to himself. "You'll be the first to laugh at the notion, after you've had a good rest."

"You think I'm looney, Will?"

"No—just knocked crooked a bit, Danny. That tumble—"

"Marsh Lee giv' me that, but I'm ready to wait fer a settlement ontel—Keep a-ridin', Will!" with a vicious clicking of his teeth. "I can't 'splain how I know it so mighty sure, but I do know that Elmy is in trouble—bitter, black trouble, too!"

Will made no reply, though he was deeply impressed by the manner of his friend, so different from anything he had seen in him since the night of their first meeting beside Rocky Creek.

He could not bring himself to believe that Marsh Lee had played such a vilely treacherous part, contenting himself with believing that Chincapin Dan would quickly lose his mad delusions when they should find all well at the ranch.

"Didn't I tell you so?" he laughed, triumphantly, as they caught sight of the peacefully twinkling lights far away over the plain. "If Satan had broken loose, wouldn't we see Aunt Betsy dancing a breakdown on the roof-tree?"

Chincapin Dan made no response, spurring his heavily panting horse pitilessly onward, sending ahead of him a long-drawn shout that brought the portly figure of the negress to the front door, wildly swinging her arms as she cried aloud—just what, was lost amid the clattering of their hoofs on the hard ground.

"I knowed it!" grimly panted Chincapin Dan, his face pale as death, his eyes glowing vividly as the lights fell across them.

"Elma! where's Elma, Aunt Betsy?" cried Will, for the first time feeling a strange, sickening fear as he looked in vain for the two maidens; for surely they would be up and eager to hear the first tidings from the plain!

"Done gone—clean gone 'long ob dat 'funelly cowboy!" spluttered the cook, plainly betraying her dismay as she recognized the two lads, instead of her young mistress and her friend as she hoped.

"What—who—when?" excitedly demanded Will, leaping to the ground and rushing up to the cook. "What'd you let 'em go for? Why didn't you stop 'em?"

But Chincapin Dan never asked a question, for he saw that Aunt Betsy was almost beside herself with fright, and he knew of a surer way to get at the truth.

Leaving his exhausted horse, he sped to the stables, making sure that Elma's mare, and Cora's mustang, both were missing, together with their respective equipments. He saw, too, that one of Colonel Jo's own riding nags was gone, and that told him enough.

He took the lantern down from its hook over the door, and with it in his hand he left the stable, hurrying to where Will was trying to win a clear explanation from Aunt Betsy, just in time to hear her say that the two young ladies had ridden away in company with a cowboy; she could not say just whom, but Chincapin Dan never once doubted; it could only have been Marsh Lee.

"Saddle a fresh critter, Will, an' git to Kunnel Jo jest as quick as fo' legs kin tote ye thar," he hoarsely muttered. "Tell him Elmy an' Cora is gone—toted off 'long o' Marsh Lee. Tell him how the p'izen critter tried to murder me—you 'member what I said?"

"But—what're you going to do, Danny?"

"I'm on tha'r trail, tell Kunnel Jo. An'—tell him I'll save 'em both, or it'll turn out my death-trail!"

And without another word, he started off in the direction indicated by Aunt Betsy, lantern in hand, to pick up the trail.

CHAPTER X.

CAPTURING AN ESTRAY.

A LITTLE knot of horsemen with Colonel Jo at their head, was riding over the gently rolling prairie at a slow, heavy gallop.

A faster pace was impracticable, for their mounts were jaded, covered with sweat and dust, panting heavily, their flanks plainly showing the desperate application of spurs.

The sun was nearly overhead, yet they were still many miles from Twin Ranch, toward which their faces were now turned.

Nearest Colonel Jo rode Curly Temple, pale of face, his jaws firmly set, sore trouble visible in his big, sky-blue eyes. For he knew that the one woman on earth for him was in danger; just what that danger consisted of, he could not say, nor did he dare ask himself this question.

They had a long and hard gallop the night last passed. He had not spared his good horse in his endeavors to check that stampede with as little loss to the herd as might be, doing his work without thought of danger to himself, though he had caught sight of that wild creature of exploding fire, and knew that it was almost surely the work of "rustlers," or thieves who hoped to make their profit by picking up the scattered herd of cattle.

Ablly seconded by his cowboys, too busy to notice the absence of Chincapin Dan or Marsh Lee, he had stuck to the work until, many a long mile away from the point of starting, he had succeeded in bringing the nearly exhausted bunch under subjection, "winding 'em up" until they stood in a compact knot, able only to move in a contracted circle without advancing a rod.

Little by little the wearied cattle grew calmer, but Curly Temple had not permitted them to "spread out" up to the time that Colonel Jo and his men put in an appearance.

Then, as nothing was seen or heard of the supposed "rustlers," the cattle were permitted to scatter far enough to lie down, for now they were past stampeding, even should such another frightful object burst suddenly upon them.

Explanations were given and received, and Colonel Jo, after making a hasty inspection of the stock, openly congratulated Curly Temple on the skill and good judgment he had displayed under such trying circumstances.

Their jaded horses were staked out, a fire was kindled and one of the dead steers butchered for meat. And the party were still resting from their toils when Will Townsend came up with his truly startling tidings.

For a few moments his story seemed too incredible for belief, but during his long gallop he had had ample time in which to convince himself that Chincapin Dan had been

right from start to finish, and he was not long in convincing the others, just as firmly.

Many were the curses hurled at Marsh Lee for his vile doings, and in those first excited minutes, his doom was surely pronounced. If he ever fell into those hands, not even a miracle could save his life!

Two of the cowboys were left to guard the herd, with orders to start them in motion toward the Twin Ranch, as soon as they recovered sufficiently to travel at all, then the rest mounted and dashed away at top speed.

The point where the stampede began was not quite reached, when Colonel Jo rose in his stirrups, shading his eyes with a hand as he gazed keenly to one side, where a horse was just coming out of a shallow swale, heading as though about to cross their trail a few hundred yards ahead.

"Mounted, but—look at that, will you!" his voice ringing out excitedly as he made a strange discovery. "Tied in the saddle, by—!"

The horse had a rider, as all could see from the first. But now that the animal had won clear of the hollow, they could make out more; the rider, though facing the natural way, had both hands bound behind his back!

"Ropes ready—spread out, but gently until it frightens!" said Colonel Jo, in quick tones, loosening his own lasso as he spoke. "We're in poor condition for a chase, but we've got to pick up that stray—got to, you hear?"

"Then you think—"

"It's Uncle Billy Breeze! It's life or death to him, and—I really believe he's mixed up in this black business!" impulsively added Townsend, his dark eyes glowing vividly.

Spreading out quickly, none of them heading directly for the animal which bore such a strange rider, the men had formed a half-circle before the estray showed signs of actual uneasiness. From the first it had stopped short, eyeing them with suspicious alertness, but not until they began to close in did it wheel to seek safety in flight.

"Rope him, if it kills every nag in the outfit!" cried Townsend, dashing forward himself. "We can make the rest afoot, if we have to!"

A strange sort of instinct warned him that it was all-important to rescue Uncle Billy Breeze, aside from a motive of humanity. He did not try to analyze that warning, but he understood it that way.

It seemed, fortunately, that the estray was fully as jaded as their own animals, though it set off briskly enough at the start. But its rider could, even if he had wished, lend it no assistance, and that proved a sufficient handicap to insure its speedy capture.

Through it all, not a sound had come from that grim rider, though all could see he was doing what he could to retard his horse, rolling his body from side to side, leaning as far over toward his nearest pursuer as the nature of his bonds would permit, forcing his steed to veer that way to keep from falling. And then, at his first cast, Curly Temple settled a noose about the creature's neck, bringing it quickly to a halt, but so gently that there was neither shock nor tumble.

"How come ye so, Uncle Billy?" cried Colonel Jo, riding up and with his knife rapidly cutting the stout thongs which held the veteran in the saddle. "Gagged, too!"

A husky, rattling, wheezing sound was the sole reply, until after one of the cowboys held a flask to the old man's lips. He drank greedily, ceasing only when his scant supply of breath gave out. Then—just drawing one breath, sent it out again in the shape of a flood of wild, fierce, extraordinary curses!

"Keep a-going!" cried Townsend, holding that gaunt figure in the saddle as he pressed forward. "Take your time, Uncle Billy, but—did Marsh Lee, my cowboy, have aught to do with this outrage, think?"

Another flood of oaths mixed with groans and accompanied by uneasy writhings in the saddle. The old fellow plainly had suffered long and sorely before his rescue, but he was gradually recovering, and would doubtless soon be able to explain just how he had come to such a pass.

"Marsh—wuss, be durned to 'em all!" were his first articulate words, outside of his furious cursing.

"Take your time, Uncle Billy, but—we're in sore trouble ourselves," gravely said Townsend, still pressing onward at the best speed the jaded animals were capable of. "Marsh Lee has played the devil! Stampeded our cattle, and tried to murder Danny! And under cover of it all, he's stole away—"

"Don't I know? Didn't I see 'em, all two both on 'em?"

"What! you saw—not Elma?"

"Then I'm a howlin' liar right from—durn an' double-durn the critters that—"

"When and where?" almost savagely demanded Colonel Jo, his grip tightening until the tough old fellow winced with pain.

"Last night—at my shack—durn 'em!" spluttered Uncle Billy.

"Sure? You saw Elma, you say?"

"I jest did! An' I saw him—the spawn o' that cussed Wild Hawk we hed the racket with over No Man's Land way! I jest did!"

"But Marsh Lee took 'em away!"

"An' Marsh Lee is Black Bruno Hawkings—wuss luck!" bitterly snarled Uncle Billy, now speaking and acting more like his usual self.

"Then we'll go right to your house, to pick up the trail!" cried Townsend, only to add, with a groan of fierce despair! But we can't! We've got to have fresh mounts before we can do anything!"

"I'll go there, and pick up the trail, while you follow on from the ranch, with fresh mounts, uncle," said Curly Temple, his voice so cold, so harsh, that none who heard could recognize it at first.

"Better me, kunnel," quickly interposed Breeze. "Your boys kin fetch on a drove o' critters to meet us thar. It'll save time. An' I'm gwine to foller them imps ef they lead me clean through hell itself!"

So it was decided, Colonel Jo, Curly and Billy Breeze heading for the shanty belonging to the old hunter, Frank and the cowboys, with Will Townsend, riding direct for the ranch, to get horses and arms for the entire party.

By so dividing, time would be gained, rather than lost, for the old hunter could be picking up the trail, the others leaving plain sign for Frank and his men to follow along after striking the trail at the but.

And then, while making what speed they could, Uncle Billy told his story, which, robbed of the numerous angry oaths which he flung in, may be summed up as follows:

He had been roused from a sound sleep by a heavy pounding at his door, and on demanding what was up, a voice bade him hasten: that Colonel Jo had been badly hurt, and wished to see him without delay.

That threw him off his guard, and as he flung open the door, he was caught and overpowered by several strong men. They struck a light, and by its rays he saw and recognized both Elma and Cora, held captive on their own horses, just outside the door.

One of the men, whom he recognized as Marsh Lee, spent a few minutes in writing on a piece of paper, which he put in an envelope and sealed up, then slipping it into the bosom of Uncle Billy—

"Where is it?" fiercely demanded Colonel Jo, snatching at the paper as the old man drew it forth, tearing it open and swiftly running his eyes over the written lines within. It began with his own name, then ran on as follows:

"I have claimed my own, old fellow, and only death can break my grip! Keep your linen on, until you hear from me again. If you even try to follow or to track me home, it will be so much the worse for Elma. I'll kill her, rather than run any risk of losing her through you or yours! If let alone, she shall soon pay you a visit, none the worse for wear, unless she stands wedded life worse than the majority of her sex.

"As for Cora Mason, I only took her along to save trouble. She shall come to no harm, unless Mason kicks up a bobbery. If he does—let him lay in a stock of mourning!"

"A last warning, Colonel Jo! You can't take a step without my knowing of it, almost as soon as it's taken. And if you dare make a move against us before I send you another message, Elma shall pay the pen. It!"

"Give my love to Curly Temple—dear lad!"

"Yours, as you prefer,

"BLACK HAWK BRUNO."

"Let me see it, uncle."

Colonel Jo started at that demand; the voice was so cold, so hard, so full of suppressed passion, that it sent a cold shiver over him. But he shook his head, thrusting the paper into his bosom before speaking:

"Not now, Curly; after we've cooled down a bit. And you, Uncle Billy: what else happened?"

"So blamed mighty much that I caint tell whar to begin!" snarled the old man, shifting uneasily in his saddle. "But 'nough fer now, that the critter who bossed the job, went away when he stuck that letter in my boozum. He left the cuss abind, with his orders, too!"

"When day broke, the cuss toted me out to whar he'd rigged up my hoss, an' tied me fast in

the saddle. He putt the lines over my neck; an' said as how mebbe ef I was smart I mought keep the critter's head p'inted the right way; fer I was to go to Twin Ranch an' giv' you the letter.

"Waal, he started me off, an' I done the best I knowed, but the pesky critter tuck a skeer at a coyote in the grass, an' when I tried to stop him by leanin' back hard, the lines bu'sted wide open! An' thar I was—mighty sight wuss then up a stump, Kunnel Jo!"

CHAPTER XI.

INTO THE QUICKSANDS.

UNCLE BILLY flung out his bony hands with a snort of supreme disgust at the mere thought, yet his wrinkled, parchment-like brow was more truthful: No man knew better than he by what a fortunate chance he had been rescued from a horrible fate.

Only for that providential meeting on the plain, he would have been carried still deeper into those vast ranges, perhaps never to be seen of mortal man while life lingered in his body, or flesh upon his bones.

"It was Marsh Lee who gave the order, you say, Uncle Billy?"

"That's the way we've knowed him, but the ugly critter he left 'long o' me to start me off at the right time, let drap he was Black Hawk Bruno. An' he said, too, that the critter was playin' to git even 'long o' what come to his pap, when Danny an' Elmy fu'st come home, ye mind, Kunnel Jo?"

"I remember. And I want you to remember, too, Uncle Billy. Remember all you owe to that devil, and let it put double-power glasses on your eyes when we get to where we can pick up the trail!"

Uncle Billy Breeze laughed: short, dry, cracked notes they were, hardly more pleasant to hear than that gaze to bear.

"My fergettery's done lost, kunnel Jo, an' I don't reckon I'll find it ag'in ontel they's a hole in the world jest the bigness o' Black Hawk Bruno: jest his bigness, from top to bottom, front to back, both sides over an' all 'round! When I kin measure that hole, an' know jest whar the cold meat is that used to fill it up, then'll be the time fer to begin to think 'bout fergettin', Kunnel Jo! Then—but not now!"

Curly Temple, feeling much the same sort of intense savagery as this, reached out a hand and gripped Uncle Billy's tightly. Their eyes met, and each knew that the other would only drop out when death called before the goal was fairly won.

Colonel Jo asked a few questions more concerning the ugly ride the veteran had taken, but it was more to kill time than from any idea of gleaning useful information. For Uncle Billy had already told him all he could relating to the captive maidens.

Will Townsend had reported the words and movements of Chincapin Dan, and as the party drew nearer to the lonely spot where the old hunter had pitched his abiding-place, all eyes were on the lookout for either Chincapin or some signs of his having passed that way. For not one present but knew how certain the youngster was on the trail, and they also knew that no ordinary double could throw him off the scent.

Nothing was seen or heard of him, however, before the lone cabin was reached, by which time their animals were so nearly exhausted that it was only by constant pricking that they could be kept in a slow trot. As Curly Temple said, they might cover the ground far more rapidly on their own feet, but both Colonel Jo and Uncle Billy vetoed that.

"We'll have enough and to spare of walking, Curly," Townsend grimly laughed. "Time enough when we're obliged to hoof it, lad!"

Uncle and nephew, with Uncle Billy, went to inspect the cabin, leaving their worn-out horses for the time being; but they found little to interest or to detain them under that humble roof. It was deserted, the surly Harrier having left the building unharmed, though from the disordered appearance of the few household articles, it was easy to see he had searched for valuables before taking to flight.

"Lookin' fer gold an' silver, mebbe," grinned Breeze, viciously showing his snaggy teeth. "What he found won't break his back totin' of it, but—thar's lead a-comin' fer ye, critter! Lead scented 'ith good burnt powder, mind yel Heaps more'n you kin git away with, too!"

"We'll strip the animals while you pick up the trail, Uncle Billy," said Colonel Jo, leaving the cabin when satisfied that it contained no clew that could be of service to them in this emergency.

Without a word Curly Temple did his part, turning the wearied animals free to forage for themselves as soon as they had recovered sufficiently from that hard ride. In silence he stowed the equipments away in the cabin, knowing that Frank would bring fresh animals, fully prepared for the road. But then he touched his uncle on the arm, speaking in low, measured tones:

"Haven't I waited long enough, Colonel Jo? Do you wish to test my pulse before permitting me to see that note?"

Townsend started, flushed, then reluctantly drew the paper from his inner pocket.

The young man exhibited a marvelous self-control, reading those lines without the slightest change of countenance. And his voice was calm and even as ever when he spoke again:

"What do you think of it, uncle? Is it all brag?"

"Half bounce, half ugly earnest, I reckon, Curly. You remember what Elma told us about the rascal who stole her before, up in No Man's Land?"

The young man nodded.

"Well, she said Hawkings spoke of his son, and called him Bruno: he said he was to marry Elma: so—you understand? This must be the same fellow, with the same mad notion in his head!"

"I'll let a hole into it big enough to give that notion a chance to leak out!"

With that Curly Temple handed the note back to his uncle, turning away to join Billy Breeze, who was already following the trail left by Black Hawk Bruno, his captives and his attending guards.

There was little difficulty in doing this, to one so keen of eye and so experienced as was that veteran. He had already recognized the dainty hoof-prints left by Elma's favorite mare, and he knew he could pick them out from among a thousand others, if need be.

"If we only had more time!" frowned Colonel Jo, with an uneasy glance toward the sun, now well along toward the west. "If we had only hit it off as early as Danny did!"

"The boy's on ahead o' us, kunnel," said Uncle Billy, casting a brief glance over his shoulder as he caught that plaint. "I've seed his track, an' yender's a sign he left fer them he knowed was sure to foller 'long o' Will's tellin'."

Here and there he pointed out the "sign" left by Chincapin Dan for his friends. Now a deep score on the ground, pointing in the proper direction. Now a broken top of bush or scrub, leaning the way their enemy had fled. Now a bunch of grass torn up and marking the trail, while where none of these could be utilized, the boy-trailer had left fragments of his clothes to tell the tale.

These marked the more difficult portions of the trail, where the nature of the ground was such that a mistake might be made by a hasty follower. As Uncle Billy observed, Chincapin Dan, missing him at the lonely cabin, and knowing that the Harriers must have paused there for some little time, had not dared hope the veteran would be one of those followers.

"If he hed, he wouldn't 'a' wasted so mighty much time fixin' the signs, ye see, kunnel. An' yit—Waal, don't 'pear like he'd wasted so turrible much, nuther!"

"No, else we'd have picked him up by this time. I'm glad, for one thing: it shows Danny wasn't seriously hurt, after all!"

"Bless ye, kunnel, he'd keep a-goin' ef he was plum' dead! I never see the beat o' his lovin' Miss Elma—no, I never, now!"

The afternoon was well spent before Frank and the cowboys, each man leading an extra mount for himself, with a pair for each of the three trailers, overtook them. But though all save Uncle Billy mounted, their progress was no faster than before.

"I ain't hankerin' fer ridin' jest now, thank'ee," dryly observed the old fellow, with a grimace as he rubbed his excoriated parts. "An' I ain't runnin' no resk o' losin' the trail 'long o' tryin' to git ahead in too big a hurry—I ain't, now!"

It was very trying to them all, but to Curly Temple in particular. The trail told them Black Hawk Bruno had been riding rapidly, while they could only proceed at a slow trot. Yet one and all knew that the trail-hunter was acting wisely in making sure of slow progress.

The sun was very near the horizon when Uncle Billy Breeze led his little force near to a fair-sized river, a troubled look on his weather-beaten face as he glanced along the trail ahead, tracing it perilously near to the river shore.

"The durned fools!" he grated, hoarsely, then flinging out a warning hand behind him as he

cried sharply: "Keep back, critters! Ef they ain't more sign then p'intin' one way—keep back, I bid ye, all!"

Crouching over, running his keen eyes here and there, from side to side, the trailer drew nearer the river, to pause at length on the very brink, staring uneasily into the water itself, lipping the shore only a scant foot beneath his feet.

The trail led directly into the water, and the tracks showed that there had been no delay, no hesitation at the brink. One of the animals had taken the water at a leap, as the deep hoof-prints plainly proved.

And that hoof-print was left by Elma Townsend's mare!

"Good Lawd!" snorted Uncle Billy, his thin lips drawn back until his yellow teeth were exposed, his face looking drawn and frightened.

He turned back, slowly passing up, then down the bank, searching for sign as a hound searches for a lost scent. He followed the trail back past the uneasy horsemen, paying no heed to the anxious questions cast at him until—

"Kunnel Jo," he said, his voice strangely grave and far from steady. "I reckon we've come to the end!"

"The end of what? They've crossed the river, of course, man!"

"The river o' death, mebbe, but not this one, Kunnel Jo!"

"What do you mean?" hoarsely cried Curly Temple, flinging himself from the saddle and rushing to the bank as though he meant to follow the trail by swimming; only to be caught by Breeze with a fierce grip.

"Don't ye—don't ye do it, lad! It's death—sure death in thar! The wu'st quicksand I know of in all Texas!"

A spell of horror seemed to fall over all within sound of his harsh voice, and Uncle Billy Breeze was hardly less affected than the others, though he still owned the power of speaking.

"It's truth I'm tellin' ye, Kunnel Jo, an' you, Curly Temple! You all kin see that they jumped right in thar. An' that means—the end forever! You'd hev to bore through the quick' to find 'em! An' then ye couldn't—wuss luck!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE HAWK AND HIS PREY.

It is providential, sometimes, that all things are not just as they appear, and though everything seemed to prove Uncle Billy Breeze right in declaring that both captors and captives had met with an awful death through unwittingly plunging into a bed of quicksand, the veteran had fallen into a trap cunningly planted for him by Black Hawk Bruno.

It is true, had he been able to probe those shifting sands deeply enough, bodies would have been discovered; but bodies of horses, not riders!

More than a mile back along that trail, picking his ground where everything was most favorable for the devilish trick, Bruno Hawkings caused his captives to be taken from their saddles and left in charge of himself, while his men took all the horses forward, seemingly without a break in the trail.

They rode rapidly as they neared the river, not giving the animals time to scent their peril, plunging from the bank and spurring on until the treacherous sands caught the poor creatures in its deadly grip.

Then the men flung themselves flat upon the water, swimming rapidly until in water too deep to be dangerous, when they crossed over, wading up the further shore until at a fit place for re-crossing.

This done, they soon after rejoined Black Bruno, and between them, carrying the captives over a rocky stretch of ground, to a covert where fresh horses were hidden in charge of other members of the gang. Then mounting, the cunning knave laughingly pursued his rapid journey toward the temporary refuge he had marked out for himself and captive.

It is here that we find them, well along in the afternoon of the day following that on which Uncle Billy Breeze led the way to the fatal quicksands.

The refuge was located in a range of rugged hills, near the foot of which flowed a fair-sized river, and everything went to prove that Black Hawk Bruno had spared neither time nor pains in making his preparations.

The retreat was partly on, partly back of a nearly level shelf of mingled rock and dirt, running along the side of one of the irregular hills, some twenty-five or thirty feet above the level of the river, which here formed a broad, deep pool, with a sluggish current, running so close to the base of the plateau that a stone falling from the rocky edge above would strike the water several feet out from the edge.

Bushes and brambles and vines partially covered the shelf, and completely masked the steep slope of the rocks beyond. These helped to conceal a rude but fairly strong hut of stones and timbers which had been built against the hill itself. And so well was it masked that one might even have passed along the shelf without recognizing it as a human habitation, unless suspicion should be awakened by something else.

But the hut itself was not all. Back of it was an opening in the rocks, formed by nature's hand, where the occupants of the hut might seek hiding in case of need, though just at present that opening was masked by a portion of the rear wall, which, to a casual glance, seemed firm enough.

Inside the cabin, when attention is called to it, was Bruno Hawkings, and with him were Elma Townsend and Cora Mason.

Their hands and feet were lightly but securely bound, not preventing their rising, or even walking after a slow, careful fashion, but quite sufficient to guard against any attempt at flight.

"All of which is your own fault, Elma, sweetness," Bruno was saying just then, in answer to a complaint on the spirited maiden's part. "If you'll give me your word of honor not to—"

"I'll remain hampered until the day of judgment, first!" was the indignant interruption.

"Or until I put on still firmer if tenderer shackles, you ought to say, pretty," mocked the villain, his dark eyes glowing with undisguised admiration as they rested on that flushed, lovely countenance. "When the holy knot is tied, of course I'll give you full use of your wings, for then I'll not fear your fleeing from your lovely groom, Elma."

"I'll die before that time comes!"

"So you've said times without number, honey-bird, yet you still draw the breath of life. And—though you fight hard to conceal the fact, Elma, you're already beginning to love your captivity—and your captor!"

"As a bird loves the snake that seeks to devour it—yes!"

"And I love you so well that I'd like—just love!—to tear your ugly eyes out!" cried Cora, her cheeks almost as red as her curly hair. "And make you eat 'em afterwards, too!"

Bruno counterfeited a lazy, insolent yawn as he glanced at that indignant maiden, then saying with a drawl:

"You're out in the cold, Fire-top. I'm not a Mormon—not sufficiently so to covet a bride whose head would scorch a pillow-case of sheet-iron, that is."

"Red hair isn't a sign of black blood, anyway!" retorted Cora, not a whit daunted. "How did you straighten the kinks in your wool?"

"Yet, if you're so hard put, my dainty strawberry blonde," sneered the villain, ignoring that blunt insinuation, "I'll try coaxing one of my men to hitch teams with you. There's one or two who'd face the Old Scratch at my bidding!"

"Don't soil your lips by talking to the miserable wretch, Cora," almost sternly said Elma, turning her back on the fellow. "As long as we answer him he'll stay here, and the atmosphere is suffocating, already."

"In a mighty hurry to shunt me off the track, aren't you, pretty?" rising to his feet, his voice growing hard and even fierce as he spoke on: "But enough of jesting: now for sober business, Elma Townsend!"

"Will you have the common decency to leave us to ourselves, sir?"

"I've given you all the grace the law allows, Miss Townsend. Now I'm going to talk pure business, and you've not only got to hear me out, but you've got to yield to my wishes, or—fare the worse!"

"Nothing can be worse than to suffer your vile presence, sir!"

With a swift stride the ruffian caught Elma by an arm, whirling her around, then forcing her back in a sitting posture on the rude pallet of grass and leaves, covered over with horse-blankets.

"Do you think so, spit-fire?" showing his cruel teeth under his curling mustaches as he glared into her paling face. "Then you're a heap bigger fool than the law allows! Then you haven't even begun to make my acquaintance! For, mind ye, Elma Townsend, I'm something more than the poor cowboy whose humble approaches you so loftily scorned back at Twin Ranch!"

"I know; a thief, a murderer!" panted the maiden, closing her eyes as her thoughts flew back to Chincapin Dan; for long before this the

vile schemer had told her of how he tricked her adopted brother on that cloudy night.

"I'm still more than that, Elma Townsend," his tones growing cold and merciless as they were even. "And now I'm going to show you just what and who I really am."

"You haven't forgotten the gentleman who carried you away last year, when Todd Dickerman met his fit reward for playing traitor. Well, that man promised you a husband. I am that man's son. And I am the very bridegroom he promised you!"

Elma gave a start, her face growing still paler than before. She knew they were in evil clutches, but until now she had not even suspected that Marsh Lee, as she had known Black Bruno, had aught in common with Wild Hawk.

"There is no need to go over the whole story, for you cannot have forgotten the main points so soon. Enough that, to win both revenge and a vast fortune, my father meant to marry you to his only son—myself."

"You know how he was foiled in this hope. You know how, with your then unknown relatives to help him, Chincapin Dan stole you out of my father's grip. You know, also, how fate turned against him, and how your adopted brother believed he had killed Wilder Hawkings."

"He did kill him—and I've always blessed the brave boy for that righteous deed!" flashed Elma, proudly.

"Chincapin Dan thought the same, but he was mistaken," with a short, ugly laugh. "He crippled father, but he escaped with life, by my aid. He lost his right hand—hell's blackest curses follow the soul of him who fired that shot! But his life was saved. He is living now, anxiously waiting for his son to carry out the bold plans his cunning brain conceived!"

"I don't—I can't believe you!" panted Elma, paling again at the bare thought.

"It's gospel truth, and if we both live long enough, you shall see and kiss your father-in-law with your own sweet lips, honey-dove of eternal delight!"

"Never—better death a thousand times!"

"So you say now, but it won't last. I'll give you this one more night to think it all over, but with the morrow you'll be Mrs. Bruno Hawkings, sure enough!"

"The bare idea is enough to kill any decent girl!" flashed Cora.

"As for you, little light-house," turning toward the speaker, "I wasn't counting on catching such poor game when I prepared to draw my net, but since I've had that ill-luck, I'll make the best of it. And this is the part you're destined to play, Miss Mason."

"You will serve Elma as bridesmaid. You will be one of the witnesses to our marriage. And then I'll pack you home, bearing with you a simple note of warning from Mrs. Bruno Hawkings, to Colonel Jo Townsend; a warning for him to bide his time until he receives another note from his niece, my wife, stating that she is fully reconciled to her lot, with only his possible displeasure to darken her horizon."

"I'll never take it!"

"You will, if I have to pin the note to your freckled forehead with a tack!" sharply nodded the ruffian. "If no other way offers, I'll dispatch you on the errand with hands bound behind you, and a gag between those red lips. So—hold your hush, or I'll call in one of my lads to keep you busy!"

As though he intended putting his threat into instant execution, Black Bruno gave a sharp, peculiar whistle, which was answered after a brief pause, by an armed man pushing open the hidden door at the rear of the hut, then thrusting a bound man before him into the room.

"You can go outside, pardner," said Bruno, with a jerk of his head toward the front door. "I'll take care of the rest."

Like the two maidens, this captive was bound, though loosely enough to enable him to shuffle along after a clumsy fashion. Unlike them, a gag was between his jaws. But this quickly yielded to the knife of the chief villain, and the girls could distinguish a gaunt, homely, yet honest countenance now the features had resumed their natural position.

"Your name is Samuel Haywood, I believe, my good fellow?"

"It is, May I ask—"

"After me is manners, my dear sir," sneered Bruno. "You are a gospel sharp—a priest or parson, are you not?"

"I am a preacher—yes. But if you think—"

"You'll discover what I'm thinking, all in good time, Parson Haywood," was the blunt interruption. "And as a sample batch—listen:"

"I had you brought here to prevent a worse

move, by lawfully joining two souls in one. Not to put too fine a point upon it, parson, your first duty is to make this young lady understand that by marrying me, of her own free and full consent, she will escape a far worse fate."

"If the young lady consents, why—"

"I do not—I never will!" impetuously cried Elma, staggering to her feet in her intense excitement. "If you are a man—if you are a true servant of God—you will not join that beast in such a foul outrage, sir!"

"Does—is this true, sir?" demanded Haywood, turning toward the outlaw, with sudden dignity in face and voice. "If so, I'll never try to force the child's will, though you tear me limb from limb!"

"I'll do all of that, and even worse, unless you bring her around to my wishes by morning, parson!" harshly exclaimed Bruno, turning toward the door, only pausing there to add: "You understand, both? It's to be a wedding or a funeral!"

CHAPTER XIII.

HOW BLACK HAWK BRUNO WAS ANSWERED.

THE present chief of the Harriers was good as his word in that one respect; having placed the matter squarely before his captives, giving them a certain length of time in which to think it over and come to a final decision, he neither curtailed the period of grace, nor thrust his company upon them.

One of the Harriers brought the prisoners their regular meals, cooked over a fire far back in the honeycombed hill, where the smoke would fade into nothingness long before it could reach the outer air.

Their hands were unbound barely long enough to admit of their eating in comparative comfort, then once more secured behind them, too firmly for releasing each other, yet not so closely as to materially disturb their repose.

An armed guard was kept on the little hut at all times, thus rendering any attempt at flight out of the question; but beyond all this, the captives were given the promised grace.

Black Bruno flattered himself that it would be time well expended.

"The old hypocrite had to bluster a bit, first-off, but be sure he'll get his work in before sun-up! Killing hurts a Christian just as bad as it does a sinner!"

With this cynical sentiment, the villain who was playing a desperate game for heavy stakes, rolled himself up in his blanket and fell asleep.

With the first flush of dawn Black Bruno came out of his blankets with a yawn. His first move was to scan the wide stretch of country visible from the ledge, or narrow plateau, looking for smoke columns rising from any of the scattered patches of trees within his range; but seeing nothing of the sort, he set about satisfying his hunger.

The guard over the hut reported that all was well with the prisoners, and this reminded Black Bruno of what that morning was to bring forth: a wedding or a funeral, he had himself declared!

An ugly laugh parted his lips as he lay down under a vine-clad bush, to smoke a pipe after eating.

"Maybe they'll think I'm weakening!" was the thought that gave birth to the sound. "If so, there's right where they get fooled! Nothing like giving plenty of rope in a case like this!"

Not for an instant did he relent or even think of showing a grain more of mercy than his parting words of the past-afternoon indicated. He had set his mark, and nothing short of sudden death could turn him from his aim.

"You needn't strain your ears, or water your eyes, pardner," he said to the Harrier then on guard before the hut, as he paused with a hand touching the door-fastening. "I'm going inside. If I need you, I'll call loud enough not to be misunderstood, never fear!"

"All right, boss," nodded the burly ruffian. "Good luck go with ye—ef 'tain't makin' too free!"

If he heard, Black Bruno let the wish pass without recognition. He opened the rude door and entered, closing the barrier behind him, standing motionless while glancing quickly from face to face of his trio of prisoners.

The light was dim, particularly for one just out of the clear sunshine, and he did not immediately read the truth, plainly impressed on those pale, resolute faces.

"What! not even a shy word as greeting to your happy bridegroom, Elma?" the ruffian cried, in mock dismay, when he at length saw something of the defiance written in that lovely countenance. "Our good friends will kindly

shut their eyes and turn away their heads long enough for you to—not one weenty bit of a buss, sweetness?"

"If my lips could blast—yes!" flashed the maiden.

"Parson, I'm afraid you neglected the duty I set before you yesterday," said Black Bruno, turning toward the preacher, his lips curling with a pantherish aspect. "Yet I more than hinted that on this young lady's compliance your own life depended. Did you comprehend?"

"Life is sweet, even to an old man," was the slow, grave response. "But life is not all, nor even—"

"Did I ask for a sermon, parson?" sneeringly interposed the outlaw. "Stick to the text I've given you, and—in one word—are you ready to marry me to this young lady?"

"I am not."

Mr. Haywood spoke quietly, but there was naught of fear or of flinching in face or figure as he stood confronting the villain. Only three little words, but a volume could not have told Black Bruno more.

The captives had improved the grace he granted them, but the result was directly contrary to that which he had hoped to bring about by leaving them together. And with a vicious curse of rage he caught the minister by the throat with one hand, whipping forth a revolver with his other, harshly snarling:

"You infernal fool! I'll blow your brains—"

In his savage chagrin he might easily have put that threat into execution, but before he could say or do more, a wiry figure dashed into the room, through the rear opening, and before Black Bruno could realize his peril, he fell like a log before a swift, sure stroke!

He dropped to the ground floor with only a gasping breath, but as the pistol slipped from his unnerved fingers, the hammer struck first, and the weapon exploded sharply.

"Not a word—fer your lives, gals!" panted the new-comer, forestalling that joyous recognition. "Leave it to me ef— I knowed it!"

Beyond a doubt that luckless explosion had alarmed the outlaws on the plateau, for hasty footfalls sounded without, and a harsh voice called out:

"What's wrong, cap'n? Shell we—"

"Haul off, ye fools! I'm running this circus, and when I want your help I'll call for it!"

Chincapin Dan wheeled from the door, shifting the clubbed revolver with which he had stricken down Black Bruno—the owner of the voice now ringing in his ears!

Yet—the villain lay in an awkward heap on the ground!

And Cora Mason, with a half laugh on her bright face, was shaking a warning finger at him as she stood in a listening attitude.

"All right, ef you say so, boss, but when we ketched the sound of a gun, like that—"

"Look out you don't catch worse, my lads!" came the voice of Black Bruno—but through the pouting lips of Cora Mason! "I've got to argue a bit with the parson, but I don't need any outside help. You sabe that?"

Chincapin Dan stared in open-mouthed amazement. The counterfeit was almost perfect, and with his eyes shut he would have been wholly deceived. There was lacking a little in volume, but the imitation was close enough to send the Harriers back from the front door.

As he heard them retreating, Chincapin Dan drew a full breath, his face flushing, his gray eyes sparkling. He stepped toward Cora, who was now recoiling, beginning to feel the effects of that unusual strain. For the instant he forgot that others were present, and before he had time to grow frightened by his own temerity, his arms were wrapped tightly around Cora, his lips pressing hers with all the ardor of awakening love!

And Cora? If she did not return that kiss, she held still until the act was completed! Then—

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Daniel Dickerman! Right before the—oh, Elma! if I could only holler—holler right out!"

"Don't—fer your life!" hastily whispered the youth, despite his sudden confusion. "Ef them p'izen critters git a idee—"

The two girls were leaning together, kissing and sobbing in unison, in the excitement of the moment hardly missing the lack of their arms.

Parson Haywood was shuffling from foot to foot in a manner that might have provoked laughter, had the situation been less critical.

Chincapin bent an eye to a crack in the front door, trying to estimate their chances in that direction, but with serious uneasiness stirring

him as he noted half a dozen or more armed men on the plateau, gathered together, talking eagerly and suspiciously glancing that way.

Escape by that avenue was out of the question, and he began to doubt if the rear avenue would prove much safer, thanks to that unfortunate shot. If he had only been able to guard against that!

As he turned from the door, Elma greeted him with a sob of joy, as yet unable to fully believe the glad truth; she had mourned him as dead, for what had seemed an age.

"Wait—better time by—n'—by, Elmy," he huskily whispered, checking his own longing at the same time. "They's too many out yender for a boy to fight, but we'll give 'em the slip through the back way."

"Alive? Oh, Danny, dear, that demon told me you were dead!" sobbed Elma, all her courage seeming to abandon her now, just when it was needed the most. "He said he killed you! He said—"

"I knew he was lying, all the time," declared Cora, that tell-tale glow deepening in her eyes as she watched Dan, now using his knife to set Elma at liberty. "And I told 'im so, too!"

Dan glanced toward the speaker, with an idea that he would dearly like to tell her something; but his eyes drooped, abashed, and those words remained unspoken. How had he dared—

"Although I don't know much about fighting, or the use of fire-arms, I'm willing to do my best against such ruffians," said Mr. Haywood, growing uneasy at this waste of precious time.

Chincapin quickly set all at liberty, and Mr. Haywood took possession of the arms owned by Black Bruno, while the boy trailer set about binding the villain hand and foot, though as yet he knew not if life remained in that carcass. He had struck hard and viciously, and a less thick skull would have been crushed like an egg-shell.

The precaution taken, he secured the front door with the heavy bar provided for an emergency, then, after another look at the plainly uneasy Harriers outside, he turned to hurriedly mutter:

"That's only one way fer us, Elmy, an' you-all. We cain't fight 'em all, in here, like as ef you-all was men, but—"

"Call us men, Mr. Dickerman," interposed Cora, a little sharply. "If we're some prettier, we're just as brave as men, I'd have you to understand!"

Elma put a little hand over those lips, whispering back:

"Hush! Let Danny speak, Cora. He knows what is best."

"I don't reckon they'll come too nigh the shack, after the way Miss Cora fooled 'em, but we cain't take too many chances. So— I'll show ye the way I come in; you kin git off that way, onseen by them in front, anyway."

"We can!" echoed Cora. "That includes you, of course, Danny?"

"We'll live or die together!" bravely declared Elma, her cheeks flushing with honest pride as she rested an arm over the shoulders of her adopted brother. "Danny goes with us, of course!"

"Then the sooner we start the better, I think," uneasily said the preacher, as the sound of voices came from without.

Dan cast a wistful, puzzled glance toward the motionless outlaw, plainly reluctant to leave him behind; but he, better than any of the others, realized the difficulties still before them, and yielded to the inevitable. Revenge must wait, for the present.

The rear door was still ajar, just as he had left it when he made such an opportune entry, and he led the girls through this, followed closely by the parson. The passage was but dimly lighted, through the cracked rocks over their heads, but Dan had already explored the way, and was not one to go astray where so much depended on prompt action.

Five minutes carried them to the masked opening through which the outer world was to be gained, and he was pointing out their proper course to pursue in order to best escape discovery by any of the outlaws, when a sudden alarm broke out in the direction of the hut!

Though dulled by the distance, there could be no mistaking this.

Black Bruno had recovered his senses, and was trying to burst his bonds, cursing furiously at his predicament.

CHAPTER XIV.

CHINCAPIN DAN'S DEATH-DARE.

THERE was but one course to follow, and the boy-trailer instantly took it.

"Go—you've got to go, Elmy!" he hastily cried, pushing the girls out through the opening.

"Make fer the timber, over yen' way, an' look fer help the best ye know how!"

"Not without you, brother!"

"Ye must! Ef I cain't check them devils, it'll be death to all o' us in a heap! Go—you'll find Kunnel Jo over thar, an' he'll come in plenty of time to help me out! Go—ef you love me, sister!"

"Trust and obey him, ladies," urged Mr. Haywood, anxiously. "Surely you know he would not advise you wrongly?"

"Do it, or you'll waste our only chainece, Elmy!" repeated Dan, giving the reluctant girls another eager yet tender push ahead.

He dared not linger longer, for those sounds grew louder and more distinct. Though he knew something of the orders given the Harriers by their chief, he feared lest they ignore them after such an alarm.

His last backward glance showed him Mr. Haywood urging the still reluctant girls away, a hand on each, then he darted through the crooked passage as swiftly as possible, pistol in hand as he reached the rear entrance to the hut.

Fortunately for the fugitives, Black Bruno was still too thoroughly bewildered to vent his suffocating rage in plain speech, else even that nimble-footed lad would have been too late to do aught in that direction.

It was, some of the Harriers were pounding heavily against the barred door, shouting aloud, demanding what was wanted.

Swiftly and as a panther, Chincapin Dan leaped upon that nothing form, both hands tightly clutching his vest, effectually shutting off his vengeful imprecation.

"What's wrong, boss?" cried a harsh voice from the front. "Shell we bust 'em down the door?"

"Do, an' I'll bust your head!" cried Dan, using his best to imitate the voice of Black Bruno, though hardly making a complete success of it.

"But—didn't you holler fer help, cap'n?" persisted the Harrier, trying to catch a glimpse of what was going on inside, but foiled by the gloom reigning there.

"Git out—I'm tamin' 'em, can't ye see?" hoarsely cried the youth, setting one hand free to pick up his revolver, now that he had choked the outlaw to partial insensibility once more.

Though he himself was invisible, thanks to the gloom of the windowless hut, he could distinguish those outside, through the cracks in the door, and his pistol held the most prominent man covered. And thus, ready to send a bullet home, he waited breathlessly.

The outlaws fell back a pace or two, but only their awe of their chief kept them from at once forcing the door. Despite commands, they were not yet satisfied that all was well with Bruno.

"Ef you say it, cap'n, all right. But—it don't sound like your own voice!"

"Fall back, I say!" sharply cried Chincapin, using as few words as possible, to lessen the danger of discovery. "I'm all right!"

An enormous weight seemed lifted from his heart as he saw, through the cracks, the Harriers slowly retreating, though he knew the respite was only temporary.

"It's so much gained, anyway!" he grimly reflected, keeping an eye toward the door while again using both hands about that muscular throat as he felt Bruno renewing his struggles.

If he could be sure the girls were making the best possible use of those hardly won minutes! That troubled him more than his own peril.

Though he had assured Elma that Colonel Jo was at the timber island toward which he urged her to flee, he had no such assurance. Indeed, since leaving Twin Ranch, he had not caught even a glimpse of his friends, though he felt fully assured they were doing all they knew how to find and rescue their loved ones.

He had proven himself a better trailer than had Uncle Billy Breeze, possibly because he had to depend entirely on himself, while the old man had, unconsciously, perhaps, relied on the trailer who he knew had gone before. And having noted the spot where a brief halt had been made by the Harriers, before sending the horses on to meet a cruel death in the quicksands, Chincapin had, slowly, but surely worked out the puzzle, until it carried him to the secret retreat of Black Bruno.

He knew that that cunning ruse had deceived his friends, else they would have reached that spot ere this, but he had not dared wait to go in quest of them, lest worse befall his sister and her friend.

All this was flashing through Dan's brain while he choked Bruno into temporary quiescence, and it told him that, barring a fortunate chance far—

too remote to be taken into consideration just then, he must depend solely on his own efforts to save his friends.

Having quieted Bruno, his next move was to fashion a rude but effectual gag, and bind it in place. Then he crossed the little room to close and secure as well as possible, the rear door, knowing as he did how easily some of the outlaws could assail him from that direction should they feel so inclined.

He had scarcely accomplished this, when the rough-toned outlaw, who had done the most of the outside talking before, again called out:

"Ef all's right 'long o' you, cap'n, just show us your face a bit, an' we'll rest easy ontel you bid us come."

"Be off, I say!" harshly cried Dan, trying the old bluff; but, there was a peculiar sound to Black Bruno's voice which he could not counterfeited, try as he might, and the Harrier sharply retorted:

"That ain't your own voice, boss! Show up, or we'll resk makin' a bu'stat the door! Jest show up, or—"

"Last time—keep back!"

"Now I know they's dirt playin' in thar!" exploded the burly outlaw, springing forward and hurling his broad shoulders against the door, to reel back, turn half-way around, then fall like a lump of clay!

Knowing that he could no longer delay the enemy by that method, Chincapin sent a bullet through a crack, killing the spokesman instantly.

Twice more he shot, but the narrow crevice fled Harriers, added to the narrow crevice through which he had fired saved one life and let a third rascal with a bullet through his shoulder.

"Won't ye keep on a-bu'sting?" jeered the bold youth, throwing off all disguise, feeling that by so doing he could prolong the end, thus granting the fugitives more time for making good their escape. "Come in a bunch, so we can all o' us hev a target, why don't we?"

Instead, the outlaws sought the nearest cover, sending an irregular volley at the hut, some of their lead splintering through the door, but for the most part burying itself in the logs or flattening on the stones, of which the wall was composed.

For a time there was silence, which Chincapin was by no means inclined to break. He was playing for time, and every minute gained was a further guarantee of life and liberty to his friends.

He dragged Bruno, once more conscious, but unable to do more than chokingly growl, into a corner, crouching down beside him where least liable to discovery from any prying eyes at the rear entrance.

The respite was of brief duration, for presently a voice called:

"Hellow, you inside thar!"

"Hellow yourself, an' see how ye like it!"

"Let out the boss, an' we'll 'low ye to go free!"

"Why don't ye come an' fetch him your own ugly self?"

"We will—but we'll leave you to roast, dug-gun ye!" viciously. "Lis'en, an' ye kin smell the smoke a-startin'!"

Chincapin caught his breath sharply as he glanced around the walls. He had not looked for such prompt and desperate action, but it took only a few more moments to convince him that the threat was not without foundation in fact.

There was a decided smell of acrid smoke, and soon after he began to note a growing light: red, ugly, deathlike!

"Ef I toast, the boss'll keep me comp'ny!" the boy averred, in tones of one as resolute as desperate.

But he had no such intention, as long as he saw a slightly better chance before him. Even before that grim threat, his busy brain had been working out the difficult problem.

He felt fairly certain that some of the outlaws had cut off his escape by means of the rear passage, and now he almost knew that they had started the fire for the express purpose of driving him into the trap thus set for him, when it would be no very difficult or dangerous exploit for them to rush in and rescue Black Bruno before the roof or walls should fall in.

"You hear what your devils is sayin' an' doin', Marsh Lee?" he whispered, bending over his captive and reading aright that vicious glare. "They ax fer me to come out, an' I'm goin'! But you're goin' 'long o' me, to share the same fate—understand?"

Drawing his knife, Dan severed the thongs which bound Bruno's feet, then jerked him to a sitting posture, holding a firm grip on his

shoulder as he pressed a revolver muzzle against his temple.

"I'm goin' to give your whelps a dare, Marsh," he announced. "I'm goin' to run you outside, when it gits too hot in hyar. An' ef your whelps shoot me, I'm goin' to kill you—kill you though they blow my hull head off fu'st!"

He saw those fiery eyes droop before his intense gaze, cowed for the time being by his death threat. Then he turned his face toward the front door, crying out distinctly:

"Listen to me, critters! I've got your boss, bound an' gagged. I'm goin' to come out by the front door, an' I'm goin' to tote your boss 'long 'ith me. You kin shoot me down, ef you see fit to try, but I'll kill him—kill him dead sure! I'll hev a gun rammed in his ear, an' off goes his ruff ef a grain o' powder is burnt on your side! Kin you take all that in, critters?"

"Harm him, and we'll skin you alive and roast you afterwards!"

"I don't 'low to harm him any, onless you try to git in a lick. I won't hurt him then—jest blow his brains out. Jus' clatter! Ef you hold off, an' talk instead o' shootin' or stickin', I'll give him back to ye, hull an' sound as he ever was. Now—make up your minds, fer it's gittin' too mighty hot in hyar fer comfort. I'm comin'!"

Jerking Bruno to his feet and pushing him to the door, Dan removed the bar, then slipped one hand—the left—through the hampered arm of the prisoner, holding a revolver against his head, then kicked the barrier wide open, calmly stepping into full view of the enemy, a cold, almost sneering smile on his freckled face!

"Shoot, critters, an' off goes his ruff!" he boldly cried, forcing Bruno further from the blazing hut, moving toward the outer edge of the level shelf. "Fall back, critters! Make way fer your boss an' your boss's master!"

It was a marvelous exhibition of nerve, and had Chincapin Dan betrayed even the slightest shadow of uneasiness, he must have lost all.

As it was, the startled outlaws fell back on either side, all the more readily perhaps because by so doing they felt that they were effectually barring all avenues of escape for that reckless being.

"You kin see fer yourselves that I've got him foul," added Dan, pausing when close to the brink of the shelf, his back toward the precipice. "I kin kill him, an' make some o' you mighty sick—ef I hev to! But—won't you take his life in pay fer mine? Won't ye let me go free fer now, ef I let you hev your boss?"

He paused for an answer, but it came from cover, not from any of the men in the open. Came in the shape of a rifle-shot!

The lead struck home, and reeling back, his pistol exploding harmlessly, Chincapin Dan toppled over the escarpment!

But in so falling, he took his prisoner, Black Bruno with him!

CHAPTER XV.

THE CRIPPLED HAWK.

THE majority of the Harriers were fully as much surprised by that shot as even Dan could have been, judging from their involuntary cries and the manner in which they cowered.

"Fetched him fu'st—the cap'n!"

The marksman, one of those who had been sent around to make sure their unknown enemy was not escaping from the rear of the cabin, gave an exultant cry, but broke off in horror as he saw Black Bruno topple over backward, joining Chincapin Dan in that ugly fall!

He was recognized by his mates, then they turned toward the spot where their chief had so recently stood—in time to hear a sullen splash of bodies entering water from a height.

With the same accord the outlaws rushed forward, leaning over the edge of the shelf to see—only the disturbed waters.

Both boy and man had disappeared from view.

"An' the boss tied up!" gasped one of the Harriers. "Ef the fall didn't kill him, he'll drown double over afore—"

"Up an' down, both ways!" sharply cried one of their number, himself leaping away at full speed.

That decisive action seemed to break the spell, and dividing, some taking the shortest trail to reach the river above the deep pool which lay at the base of the plateau, others going to strike the water at a lower point, the Harriers did their level best to retrieve the probably fatal mistake their comrade had committed.

The foremost fellow uttered a loud cry of glad encouragement as he gained a point from whence he could catch a glimpse of the water, for just then the head of a human being was

visible above the surface. Almost instantly it sunk out of sight, but the Harriers believed he recognized Bruno, and plunging into the river he swam rapidly as possible for that little ring of rising bubbles.

Diving, he searched vainly at first, but on the second attempt, when several of his mates were in the water to lend their aid, he fastened on what seemed a corpse far under the surface, bringing it to the top and calling in panting tones for help.

This was immediately rendered, for all near enough could recognize the purple face of their chief.

"Two's a-plenty!" called out the rescuer, as the Harriers flocked around, each one eager to lend a hand. "Rest o' ye hunt fer that p'izen critter who—ketch him, ef it on'y jest a hunk o' cold meat!"

Bruno was borne to shore, at a point further down the river where a narrow strip of sand gave place for easy handling of that terribly limp, nerveless body. And when this was accomplished, the rescuer, one Sankey by name, sent one of his aids back to join in the search for Chincapin Dan.

Sankey cut the cords that kept the gag in place, and set those livid lips free. He cut the bonds around Black Bruno's elbows, then made a crude examination of the seeming corpse.

As far as he could learn, just then, one of the chief's legs was broken by his fall, while his face and throat seemed a mass of blood-blisters. Yet—

With a start those swollen lids flew open, and a breath shook the dripping figure from top to toe.

More! With it came a quantity of frothy blood!

The two outlaws shrunk back with pale faces.

Beyond a doubt he was injured internally, though his hurts might prove of little real danger in the end. For he was able to speak, in broken, husky snatches.

"Where is—find him! Bring—I'll kill—inches!"

"The boy is divin' fer him, cap'n, as mebbe ye kin see," said Sankey, supporting that shivering frame against his knee, the better to enable Black Bruno to see what was going on. "I reckon he's dead a'ready, though, fer he keeled over like—"

"Who shot? Who dared—"

Another choking—another gout of blood—then Black Bruno seemed to fall into a swoon, terribly like death itself.

Fearing as much, Sankey called others of the gang to shore, and for the time being forgetting all about Chincapin Dan living, or Chincapin Dan dead, he had them rig a rude litter on which they could carry the insensible outlaw up the steep slope leading from that quarter to the plateau on which their refuge had been built.

As they reached this, one of the party uttered a low ejaculation and pointed toward the far-away plain, where a moving object caught his restless eyes. Though so distant, it was not difficult to recognize those dots as human beings, and their number, with their plainly being afoot where everybody rides, just as certainly betrayed their identity.

They all felt lost, now there was no head to direct their movements, and though one or two mumbled something about chasing and bringing back the fugitives, no one took the lead to start his fellows on.

Black Bruno was carried to a spot near the still burning hut, the frail roof of which had fallen in, though the walls were still intact. Being built as much of stone as of small logs, the latter of which were green, and full of sap, the fire had done them little harm, while a few hours' work would repair the roof.

The rude litter was scarcely lowered to the ground before Black Bruno showed signs of life, spitting up more blood, and seeming greatly relieved by so doing. It seemed to clear his lungs as well as free his throat, and he even rose on one elbow to stare dizzily around.

"Where—fetch him here!" he panted; then, as a fresh fear struck his whirling brain, he cried with more distinctness: "The girls—I don't see—where are they, ye devils?"

"They've done tuck to the prairie, pard," hastily whispered one of those who had sighted the distant dots on the far-off level. "We see em over yan' way, when totin' up the boss!"

Sankey sprang in the direction indicated, forming a tunnel of his curved palms, through which he gazed at the distant figures. With eyes keen as those of the hawk, he quickly recognized the sex of the trio, by their difference in dress. Two women, one man!

"It's them, sure enough! Three, afoot, goin' off—them, dead sart'in! Makin' fer the timber bunch, yender!"

Cowed by the choking fury of their chief, the Harriers had slunk back and away from his litter, some of them following Sankey, others tearing at or poking aside the fragments of the fallen roof, seemingly eager to enter and search the hollow hill behind.

Sankey showed the most grit of all, returning to Black Bruno and reporting: the captives were several miles distant, on the plain, making their way toward home, yet not so far but what they might be easily overtaken by horsemen, if he so desired.

"Do it—I'll murder the last one o' ye if I'm to lose both of my prizes!" the half-crazed chief raved, following the words with a torrent of curses and groans, commingled.

"Git the critters, boys!" sharply cried Sankey, taking command by tacit permission. "All but a couple o' ye go fer the hosses. Them two must help me git the boss under kiver. Lively, now!"

"Shell I keep the boys hyar, boss, long 'nough to help me set your leg? I'm fearin' it's broken, but mebbe—"

"No—catch the girls first!" cried Black Bruno, speaking with greater distinctness than at any time since his fall from the shelf. "I can wait, but they—bring 'em back, I say! If they get off—if they find their friends and tell all they know—it'll be death to every devil of us! Catch them—off with ye, devils!"

"I'll hurry 'em up. I kin hear the critters a'ready, boss," soothingly muttered Sankey, unconsciously treating the once terrible chief much as he might a spoiled, fretful child.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Harriers were in the saddle and making the best of their way down the hill, over the river, and then spurring their mounts to full speed as they headed in the direction taken by the trio of fugitives.

Now that they were unaided by an elevation, they could not see the game they were after, but they knew the correct course, and headed direct for the clump of timber for which the fugitives had, seemingly, been aiming.

Riding at such speed, distance is quickly devoured, and a wild yell broke from the lips of those who had forged ahead of their fellows, as they caught sight of the trio, two women and one man, still several hundred yards from cover, though now running, having plainly taken the alarm.

"Whooray!" yelled the leading Harrier, swinging his hat above his head. "They'm our meat, pardsl! An' now the boss won't snash his teeth in the mugs o' us when—*Holy smoke!*"

He wrenched up his horse so violently as to almost turn the animal over backward, for he caught sight of a body of mounted men just coming in view around that identical timber island!

The recognition was simultaneous, for little puffs of blue smoke shot out from the other band, and long-range rifles sent lead spitefully hissing near the outlaws.

"Back!" howled the leader, wheeling in mad flight. "Back an' save the boss! Ride fer life! Fer his life, mind ye, boys!"

Rapidly as they had come, the Harriers went back with still greater swiftness. Then they were riding for others, now they were racing for themselves! And with hardly a backward glance to assure themselves that they were being pursued, they reached the river, crossed it, rushed up to the plateau with warning shouts to Sankey and Black Bruno, knowing that the loss of one minute might mean their death. Then—

The head outlaws went down in death as a repeating rifle sent a leaden hail out through the roofless hut!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE END OF THE DEATH-TRAIL.

THAT unexpected shot from cover struck Chincapin Dan directly over the heart, glancing from the metal-bound haft of his knife, without breaking the skin, though the terrible shock robbed him of breath and destroyed his balance, at the same time knocking his pistol-hand upward enough to send his shot over instead of through the skull of his prime enemy.

Had he not had one hand through the bound arms of Black Bruno, he might have fallen without carrying that villain down to suffer tenfold worse than came to himself, for, more through good fortune than any skill on his part, Chincapin Dan struck the water in an upright position, feet-first.

And the instant he felt the cool water, his recently formed plans flashed back upon his brain, clearing his wits and leaving him as cool

and active as though he had carried out the first portion of them, by leaping voluntarily from the plateau.

His feet struck the rocky bottom, then he instantly dove toward the nearest shore, coming up, as he had calculated when he took up his station on the bank above, inside a narrow pass or crack, extending several yards up the face of the rock, masked thickly by vines.

Once there, long before the swiftest of the Harriers could gain the river, Chincapin Dan felt comparatively safe, although he knew the crooked passage back of that crevice ran onward and upward until it found a way into the dark den back of the now blazing hut.

He had learned so much while exploring the den on the night last past, seeking some means of escaping with—when he should have set them free—his friends, without running the risk of raising an alarm by trying to overpower or kill the guard stationed at the mouth of the passage through which, later, he had conducted Elma, Cora, and Mr. Haywood.

He had been bitterly disappointed at the time, knowing that neither of the girls could swim, and doubting his own powers too much to think of trying to carry them over the river. But the memory came back to him while holding the Harriers at bay, and when he knew that all other avenues were closed, he resolved to try that, rather than leave Black Bruno alive.

And crouching there with his face close to the green leaves, one hand tightly gripping his second pistol, ready to "make his mark" in case of discovery, Chincapin Dan watched the outlaws diving for their chief. And he actually covered that purple face as it rose above the surface, almost directly in front of his covert, only holding his fire when he fancied he recognized death in that discolored visage.

He was near enough to hear what passed on the little sandy reach further down the river, and as that told him his arch-enemy still lived, Chincapin clinched his teeth firmly, silently vowing to risk his own life a score times more, if needs be, rather than permit Black Bruno to go clear!

He watched the outlaws as they dove for his body, and laughed softly to himself at the grim fancy. Then, when Sankey called the men to assist him in bearing their chief up to the den, the boy trailer turned and cautiously picked his way through the darkness, more than ever determined to make sure work.

He kept well back in the dark den, finding the atmosphere quite bearable, thanks to the inward draught which quickly dissipated the acrid smoke. He heard the men talking, and even caught the words that told of the discovery of the fugitives.

For a brief space he felt as though he must hasten to cover their flight, but a brief reflection told him how little he could do against so many armed men in the open, afoot as he would be. And so, choking back his rage and fears as best he might, he stuck to his original plan, knowing that, if worst came to worst, he might be able to save his friends through regaining possession of the crippled Hawk.

He was hiding in a close corner of the den when Sankey had Black Bruno borne into the hole, and from there he watched, waiting his time to act, with what patience he could summon.

He learned, through Sankey's report, that the main force had mounted and set off in chase of the fugitives, but even then he held his anger in stern subjection, waiting to learn for certain just how strong a force had remained to care for the crippled Harrier.

This soon came, and then, knowing that Sankey alone was near enough to lend Bruno assistance, Dan watched his chance, and, leaping upon the outlaw, from the rear, knocked him senseless with a single stroke of his clubbed revolver.

He struck so hard that the weapon was disabled, but he cared little for that, knowing himself far more than a match for the groaning, half-sensible Hawk.

And, almost before he could realize his peril, Bruno felt those sinewy fingers once more gripping his throat, a pair of sharp knees boring savagely into his stomach, causing him such horrible agony that he swooned outright.

Though startled by the ease with which he overpowered the Harrier, Chincapin took no chances, pitilessly binding and gagging Bruno, giving over only when that knave was helpless as though death itself had fairly claimed him for its own.

Then he treated Sankey after the same fashion, tying the last knot just as that thick-skulled rascal gave a gasp of returning consciousness.

Now leaving the precious pair lying in the darkness, Dan took the Winchester repeater belonging to the latter, and ran out upon the plateau, gazing anxiously toward the timber island which he had urged his friends to reach as quickly as they might.

He was just in time to catch a glimpse of the Harriers, in full flight, the leaders plunging into the river to swim their horses over.

He saw other horsemen coming, but dared not wait to mark them more distinctly, rightly reasoning that the outlaws would at least make an effort to save their chief if, as he hoped and believed, they were in flight from an enemy.

He rushed back to the den, dragging Bruno into a snug crevice, rolling a couple of heavy rocks to block up the opening; then, taking a stand where he could fully command the entrance, through the ruined hut, he waited.

His patience was not long tested, and, as the leading outlaws came into full view, Chincapin opened fire, sending out a perfect stream of fire-urged lead, yet trying hard to make every shot count!

Three Harriers went down, and as the others turned to flee, Dan followed them with bullets as long as one remained alive or in sight.

It was all he could do to resist the temptation to follow after the survivors, but the thought of Bruno enabled him to resist that rash temptation, even when he heard loud cries below and beyond the plateau, mingled with rifle and pistol-shots.

And when another man sprung into view, Dan came within an ace of sending a bullet through—

"Kunnel Jo!"

The trail had reached its end!

For Black Hawk Bruno—Bruno Hawkings—never left that dark den, save to die!

He drew his last breath on the plateau, surrounded by his bitterly hated enemies, with Elma Townsend and Cora Mason only a few rods distant, awaiting the end—died with imprecations on his lips—with the threat that, though he had failed, another would take up his unfinished work!

After the outlaw was buried close to the fire-marked hut, Colonel Jo explained how they had chanced on the scene so opportunely, having been drawn that way by the column of smoke rising above the burning hut. Then he asked a solution of that dying threat, to learn from both Elma and Chincapin the startling news of how Wilder Hawkings had escaped the death all had assigned him.

Several of the Harriers were captured, and taken in bonds to answer for their crimes.

The dead were gathered and placed inside the den, which Colonel Jo caused to be walled up with many heavy rocks.

Despite the uneasy feeling born of that dying menace, it was light-hearted company that rode away toward Twin Ranch that afternoon.

Curly Temple seemed afraid to let Elma go beyond reach of his arm, after all he had suffered through her abduction. And Elma seemed entirely willing to be so tenderly guarded!

"While—poor me!" pouted Cora Mason, with a sigh that was not all counterfeit as she cast a demure glance toward Chincapin Dan. "I might just as well be on a desolate island, all by my lonesome self!"

Even then Chincapin was too bashful to take the sweet hint, for, somehow, he felt that every other person in the company must know what made Cora's lips so red—must see the kiss he had—how dared he do it?

Twin Ranch was reached in safety, and in the general gayety which followed that home-coming, all thoughts of Bruno and his evil associates were banished. And—just to show that some things can be done as well as others!—Cora bravely took Danny's face between her plump hands that evening, and gave him a rousing "good-night" kiss, right before the whole family!

Colonel Jo tried to discover the whereabouts of the elder Hawkings, but, finding no trace of him, came to believe that Bruno had been raving when he gave utterance to that threat.

And when Christmas-tide came around, Elma made "Curly" Clark Temple the happiest man on earth, by becoming his wife.

And Cora Mason, while kissing the blushing bride, saucily whispered in Elma's ear:

"I'm too young, yet, darling, but—I'm going to be a bride, some day, and—Danny's got to help make me one, too—so there!"

THE END.

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